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029

When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace 2

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Squirrely gone wild

Pineapple?

Haro

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CHARACTERS

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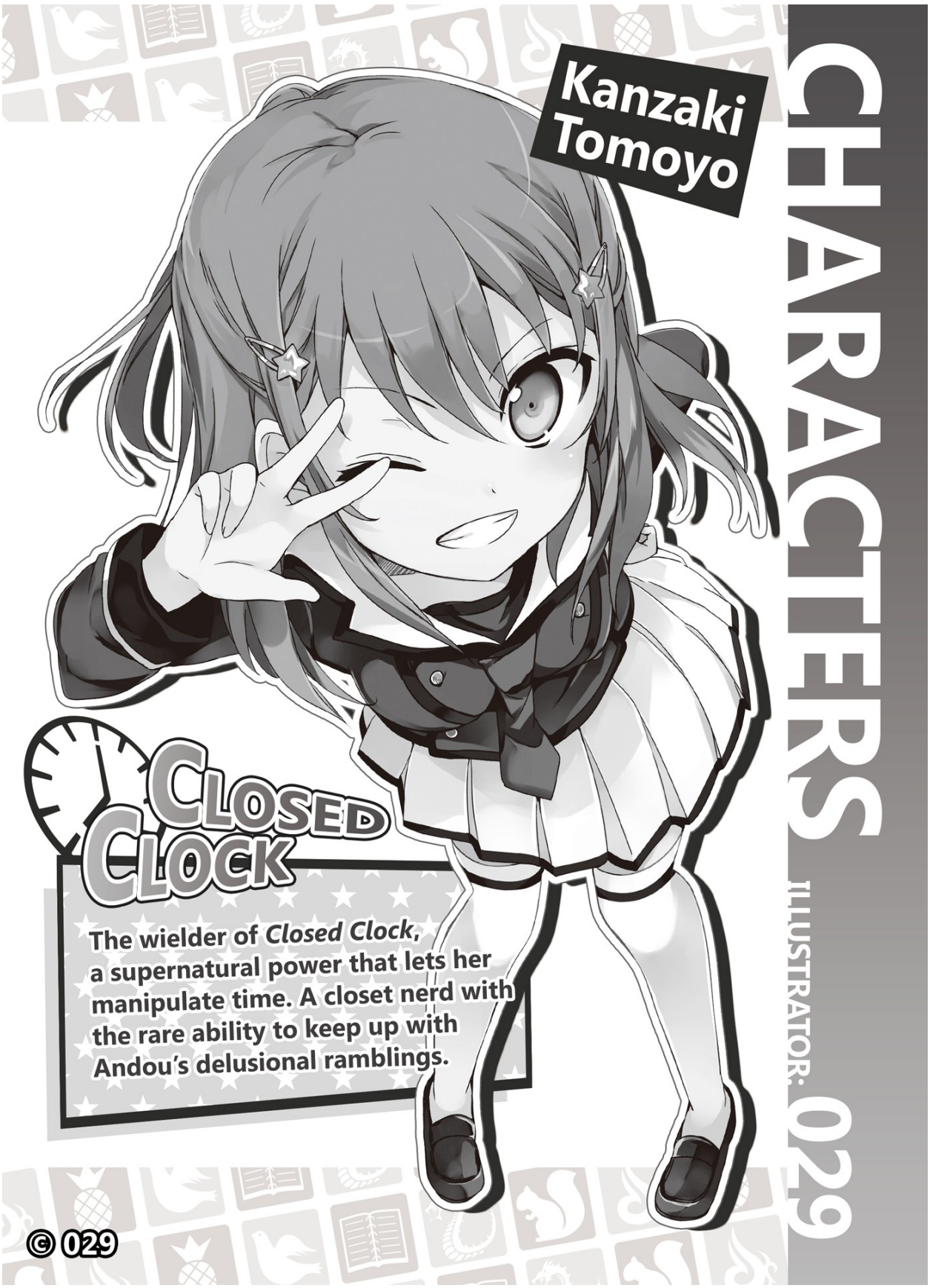
Kanzaki Tomoyo
Closed Clock
The wielder of *Closed Clock*, a supernatural power that lets her manipulate time. A closet nerd with the rare ability to keep up with Andou's delusional ramblings.

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Kushikawa Hatoko
A childhood friend of Andou's, whose power, *Over Element*, gives her absolute control over the forces of nature. She never understands a single word that comes out of Andou's mouth.
OVER ELEMENT
DARK AND DARK
A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, *Dark and Dark*, lets him create lukewarm black fire...and nothing else.
Andou Jurai
Takanashi Sayumi
The mild-mannered and erudite president of the literary club. She's all but mastered her power, *Route of Origin*, which allows her to return anything and everything to the way it's meant to be. She mostly just uses it to mess with Andou, though.
ROUTE OF ORIGIN
WORLD CREATE
A fourth-grade elementary schooler who spends all of her time hanging out in a high school literary club, for some reason. Her power, *World Create*, gives her the ability to create matter and space freely, and she's less than reserved about using it.
Himeki Chifuyu

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Chapter 1: Awakening——Aborted

I have a childhood friend. His name is Andou Jurai, but I've called him Juu for as long as I can remember. We live right next to each other, and our parents have always been on good terms, so we've been close ever since we were little kids.

We went to the same kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and even high school, purely by chance! Juu likes to say that we're "stuck with each other"…which is rich coming from a guy who's *always* going on about "fate" this and "destiny" that. Why couldn't he say that our friendship was destined too? Not that it really matters to me or anything...

Speaking of Juu, he's always loved playing make-believe. He couldn't get enough of those "riders" and "rangers" on TV, and I used to pretend to transform into superheroes with him all the time. Every time whatever show that was airing introduced a new transformation pose or a new special attack, Juu would have it mastered within the day, and he'd show it off to me the first chance he got.

I always loved those little performances of his…though actually, that's not quite right. Honestly, I didn't care about "riders" or "rangers" or any of that stuff at all. What I loved was watching Juu enjoy himself to his heart's content.

As we grew older, though, Juu started maturing in a really strange direction. For example, one time in sixth grade, he came up to me and said, in the most serious tone possible, "Hey, Hatoko. Have you ever considered the possibility that the world we live in is all just a long, elaborate dream playing out deep within my subconscious? Can you prove that it isn't? You can't, right?"

Frankly, all I could think was, "How on earth does he say stuff like that with a straight face?"

Then there was one time in our first year of middle school. "Why do you think people die, Hatoko? I'll tell you: it's because somewhere, deep down, they *believe* they're going to die someday. Thus, it stands to reason that the opposite is also true: if one truly believes with every fiber of their being that they'll never die..."

All I could think was, "Why does he look so *satisfied* with himself?"

Then there was something he told me in our third year of middle school —the pièce de résistance of Juu-isms. It happened right after I'd called him Juu, just like I always did.

"You really need to stop calling me that, Hatoko. We're in our last year of middle school, you know? Isn't it about time to give that tired old nickname a rest?" he said, his voice cold and indifferent.

It was a bit of a shock, honestly, but it was also pretty easy for me to accept. Juu was a boy, after all. He was probably just embarrassed about a girl calling him by a friendly, cutesy nickname.

“Yeah…okay,” I replied, doing my best to keep my disappointment from showing on my face. “What should I call you, then?”

Juu grinned—maybe the biggest and brightest grin I’d ever seen from him. “From now on, call me Guiltia Sin Jurai!”

Not even joking.

All I could think was, “Oh, god, he’s actually serious.”

To make a long story short: my childhood friend Juu is a really strange person.

☆

“Oh…it’s you, Andou. Hey, do you know why I asked you to come talk with me?”

One day after school, I found myself in the staff room speaking with my conspicuously irritated English teacher, Miss Satomi.

“Actually, no.”

“You don’t, huh…? Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t,” she replied offhandedly before failing to stifle a big, long yawn.

Aside from being my English teacher, Satomi Shiharu was also my homeroom teacher *and* the faculty advisor for the literary club. As such, I had a pretty close working relationship with her. She *looked* well put together on a superficial level—she seemed to be in decent shape, and she had a nice enough face—but she suffered from a critical lack of motivation and projected a constant not-my-problem sort of aura, which made it hard to describe her as attractive on the whole.

The sleep mask that she kept more or less constantly strapped around her head, just in case she got the chance for a power-nap, certainly didn’t help either. She had a ton of them, all with different designs. Today’s happened to have writing on it, which read “Sleep Well, Grow Well.” *Where does she even buy those things?*

“So, I wanted to talk with you about…yeah. You know. About…that. Uhh…what was it again?”

“Don’t ask me!” She’s as groggy as ever…

Miss Satomi was actually the aunt of Himeki Chifuyu, an elementary schooler who came by the literary club to hang out almost every day. If they had one thing in common, it was their mutual tendency to fall asleep at the drop of a hat. Their exhaustion meter was always turned up to eleven. It made me wonder if it was genetic or something. Could their whole family be like that?

“Ah, right, that’s it!” she said, finally remembering why she’d called me to the staff room. “It’s about the test you took the other day.”

“You mean the English test? Why, was there a problem?”

“A *problem*? Of course there was! There were a bunch of them, even—it wouldn’t be a test if there weren’t!”

“Not *that* sort of problem! I’m asking if there was a problem with any of my answers!”

“Ohhh, okay. Yeah, that makes more sense. Anyway, yeah, you could say there was a problem, in a manner of speaking,” she said, pulling my answer sheet out of a folder and laying it down on her desk.

What could the issue be? I wondered. We’d taken the test just recently, and I was actually pretty confident that I’d done well on it, so I couldn’t imagine what merited a personal callout like this.

“Let’s start here,” said Miss Satomi, pointing at one of the questions. It was a translation problem; we were given an English sentence, and I was supposed to translate it into Japanese. The English sentence read:

•Tom wakes up at six every morning.

And I translated it as:

Tom Awakens at six every morning.

Hmm. Nope, don’t see a problem here.

“‘Awakens’? Seriously…? And why did you capitalize it? Is it supposed to be some sort of proper noun? Just what on earth happens to Tom at six a.m. every morning?”

“Search me. You’d have to ask Tom.”

“Right… We’ll come back to that. Next is this problem,” said Miss Satomi, pointing at a different spot on my test.

•She continued crying in the dark room.

She continued lamenting in the stygian chamber.

“What sort of high schooler just casually uses the word ‘lamenting’ like that? Heck, *I* had to think for a hot minute before I could remember what ‘stygian’ meant! That’s the sort of word you usually only see in old gothic horror novels!”

“Ha ha, thanks!”

“That wasn’t a compliment. I was criticizing you, actually.” She sighed listlessly. “I have so many other examples, it’s hardly even worth trying to list them all. You put ‘cachinnate’ instead of ‘laugh,’ ‘forfend’ instead of ‘protect,’ ‘expeditious’ instead of ‘fast,’ ‘circumscribe’ instead of ‘circle,’ ‘relinquish’ instead of ‘drop,’ ‘absolve’ instead of ‘forgive,’ ‘befouled’ instead of ‘dirty’... Hey, Andou?”

Miss Satomi looked up at me. She didn’t sound accusatory so much as just plain curious. “Why do you go so far out of your way to use weird, rare words?” she asked.

I chuckled internally. *Really now? What an utterly silly question.* “Because they’re just sorta, I dunno…neat, I guess. Right?”

It’s the same reason I dropped a “stygian” into *Dark and Dark*’s preamble. I couldn’t think of a better way to explain it than calling them just plain neat, but that didn’t change the fact that they are most certainly that thing. *Complicated words: cool. Weird, archaic words that nobody else ever uses:* hella *cool.*

Miss Satomi sighed once again. “Yup, that’s the Andou I know—totally incomprehensible. Speaking of which, you know that all those nonsense words you use make it really hard to understand what you’re actually trying to say, right? Not that I care *that* much, really,” she clarified, giving me a look that made it very clear I was a certifiable problem child in her eyes. “The fact that you actually get decent grades in spite of it all is pretty obnoxious, though.”

That’s right. I, Andou Jurai, the second-year high schooler, got grades that put me in the upper-middle tiers of my class’s rankings. I was actually pretty diligent about studying in my free time.

“I’d *love* to mark all the questions you decided to screw around on as wrong, but I have to admit, they’re *technically* close enough to correct that I can’t really justify it…”

Mwa ha ha! That’s right! I’ve mastered the nuances that let me get away with this stuff! Take “sneer,” for instance. You can’t swap that out for “smile” when it’s a happy, friendly sort of expression. No, a sneer has to be scornful, disdainful!

“Ughhh…” Miss Satomi spent a moment longer glaring at my test, then she let out a big yawn. “Oh, whatever. I’m too sleepy to bother anymore. Bringing you back into polite society’s a lost cause—or at the very least, I’ve lost all motivation to make it happen. I’ll leave rehabilitating you up to Takanashi.”

Let the record show that I didn’t think I was in any need of rehabilitation in the first place. From a purely objective perspective, I’d actually call myself a pretty diligent student! My grades were just fine, and my attendance record was totally unblemished: not so much as a single tardy on the books. I’ll grant you that every once in a while I had a little bit of trouble on the impulse control front, but that aside, I was just an average high schooler who’d been chosen by the fates for a higher purpose.

Anyway, Miss Satomi seemed to have decided she was done with me and pulled her sleep mask down over her eyes. That was her way of saying that it was naptime and I could go on my way, so I quietly turned around to oblige her. Or at least, that was the plan until the staff room’s door slid open before I managed to get there.

“Oh, hey, Andou. What’re you doing here?” asked an excessively handsome young man as he stepped inside. He had the sort of face that was better described as beautiful rather than studly, and his slender, delicate figure gave him an overall air of elegant refinement. His hair was also longer than most boys kept theirs, tied back in a ponytail.

“Oh. Sagami,” I bluntly replied. His full name was Sagami Shizumu, and he was…well, not a friend of mine, that’s for darn sure. More of an acquaintance, really. Or rather, just a guy I happened to have been stuck in the same class with for two years running. We tended to eat lunch in our classroom together, but that was pretty much where our relationship began and ended.

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Sagami walked over to me and gave me the sort of look that would make his admirers swoon. “What do you mean, ‘Sagami’? How many times have I told you to stop treating me like a stranger and call me Sagamin, already?”

“Not happening! If I call you by a nickname, people are gonna start thinking we’re *friends* or something.”

“Is that how it is? What a shame.”

“And besides, *you’re* the one who never shows me the reverence and awe I deserve! How many times have I told you to call me Guiltia Sin Jurai?”

“Absolutely not. If I call you by your true name, people are going to start thinking I’m a lunatic,” he quipped harshly. “But anyway, what *are* you doing here, Andou?”

I gave Sagami a quick rundown on what had landed me in the staff room, and he blithely replied that he wasn’t surprised. He sure didn’t seem to care much for somebody who’d gone out of his way to ask about it, but I already knew he was that sort of person and didn’t pay it much mind.

“Your turn,” I said after I’d finished explaining. “What’re *you* here for?”

“Me? I’m just here to pick up the love of my life, that’s all.” With that, he strolled over to Miss Satomi (who was out like a light at that point) and shook her by the shoulder.

“Mnhgh…whaddya want? Oh…Sagami?”

“Yes, it’s me, and I’d appreciate it if you’d return my lover now.”

“Oooh, right... Totally forgot about that.” She slowly, stiffly heaved herself to her feet, plodded over to a corner of the staff room, and then plodded her way right back again carrying Sagami’s lover…by which I mean his Nintendo 3DS. “Here. Hope this taught you a lesson about playing video games in class.”

“Excuse me, but I wasn’t *playing* anything. I was fostering a beautiful, budding relationship!” proclaimed Sagami, his brilliant smile contrasting with how hopelessly gross his proclamation actually was.

Sagami’s looks were so off the charts it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call him a living personification of beauty itself, but that just served to cover up his true identity. He was a nerd, and even worse, he was one of *those* nerds: the sort of nerd that falls hopelessly in love with 2D girls; the kind of nerd who calls anime characters his “waifus” and video game characters his “lovers.”

That thought process reminded me of something. “Hey, speaking of lovers, didn’t you tell me you were dating a first-year girl just a little while back?”

“Oh yeah, her. That’s old news. She dumped me, as usual.”

“*Already*? It didn’t even last a week this time?!”

“Just awful, right? And she was the one who asked me out in the first place!”

“Let me guess: you decided to stop to buy some scantily clad anime girl figure while you were walking home with her, right?”

“Wrong. I was buying an eroge this time. Then she shouted something about how I wasn’t the person she thought I was and dumped me on the spot.”

“That’s the same thing, moron!”

Thanks to his peerless looks, Sagami was stupidly popular with the opposite sex. He got asked out often enough to get more than a little on my nerves, and what was even more irritating was the fact that he said yes every single time.

The problem, though, was that even when he was in a relationship, he made absolutely no effort whatsoever to adjust his lifestyle to suit his partner. Nobody would ever imagine him as the sort of person who indulged in hyper-nerdy hobbies judging by his looks alone, and when his girlfriends would find out about said hobbies (more or less instantly, thanks to his behavior), they would dump him soon after

The rumor that the quality of Sagami Shizumu’s looks and his personality had a perfectly inverse relationship with each other had spread far and wide among the second- and third-year girls at that point, and the flood of prospective girlfriends had finally started to die down. The moment a new school year and a new class of first-years had arrived, though, history began repeating itself. *God, I can’t stand this guy. Sure would be nice if he got hit by a truck or something.*

“Give it to me straight, Sagami. What side are you on? 2D or 3D? Which one are you *really* into?”

“Both of them, but if I absolutely had to choose, I suppose I’d have to pick 2D girls. 3D ones are just a close second. They’re nice and all, but they’re also a pain in way too many ways.”

What an absolute waste of a pretty face. If he had any sense of decency, he’d raise his hands in the air, shout “People of Earth! Let me give you my hottie energy!” and pull a reverse Spirit Bomb, sacrificing himself for the sake of men all around the world.

“I see you two are still a couple peas in a pod,” muttered Miss Satomi as she watched our exchange. “Guess problem students of a feather flock together, or something to that tune. Look, Andou, Sagami—I’m not saying that having geeky hobbies is a bad thing! I’m just saying you should learn to tone it down a little, that’s all.”

The two of us did a synchronized double take. We’d been just about ready to leave, but there was no way we were letting a comment like *that* go unchallenged.

Not that I was mad about getting called a geek, to be clear! I was perfectly aware that the word was pretty much made to describe people like me, and I was way too forgiving of a person to snap over something that petty. Getting lumped in with Sagami, though? Now *that* was unforgivable!

“*Please*,” I replied, “give me a break, Miss Satomi! I’m nothing like that moé-swilling, waifu-wrangling creeper! He’s one of those losers who picks anime to watch based on which voice actresses are in them!”

“That’s right! We’re nothing alike! I refuse to even consider the idea that I have anything in common with that chuuni nutjob. *He’s* the sort of cringelord who dreams up self-insert OCs for every new anime he gets into, and I’ll thank you for not putting me on his level.”

Sparks flew as we spent a couple seconds glaring daggers at each other. Neither of us was willing to budge an inch, even if said sparks lit the room aflame around us.

“Well, *you* only ever watch those stupid, boring harem anime!” I snapped. “What’s so fun about seeing some random guy flirt around with a bunch of girls? There’s literally no substance to those shows at all!”

“No substance? What on earth are you talking about? When it comes to shows like that, flirting around with girls *is* the substance, and I happen to enjoy them!”

“Oh, and while I’m at it, how about you stop buying all the Blu-rays for the smuttier ones? I know for a fact you only get them ’cause you’re hoping that all the steam and light rays covering up the boobs got edited out! If you wanna see nipples that badly, just buy actual hentai like a normal person!”

“You just don’t get it! Nipples in a work of popular media have a very particular appeal that nipples in pornography could never hope to achieve.”

“Hmph!”

“And besides, who are you to talk, Andou? The shows *you* watch are all so ridiculously convoluted that trying to understand them on a first viewing is a total lost cause. Unless, of course, you track down their official websites and memorize a technical manual’s worth of jargon and diagrams in advance—because that’s a *totally* normal thing to do, right?”

“Hah! They’re good *because* they’re convoluted! Highly developed, finely tuned worldbuilding is all about seeing how all those tiny, intricate details fit together!”

“At the very least, they could stop using made-up words for all their technical terms. You don’t get all the exposition on them when the story’s adapted to anime, so it ends up sounding like a load of hot nonsense.”

“Why do you think the official sites *have* lists of all the terminology in the first place?! Or, you know, you could just read the original work!”

“You’re impossible, really. This is exactly why I can’t stand chuunis like you.”

“Yeah, well it’s better than being an obnoxious moé freak!”

“You’d best watch yourself, Andou, or I’ll Pretty your Cure!”

“As if, Sagami! Just wait till you witness the *true* depths of the sins of Guiltia. They’ll make your head spin!”

“Uh, guys?” said Miss Satomi, irritably cutting into our little spat. “I’m barely keeping up with all this, but if you think each others’ favorite anime are boring, why don’t you just not watch them?”

Sagami and I fell silent. She had spoken the most taboo of phrases: “If it’s bad, then just don’t watch it.”

You just don't *say* stuff like that! Any good anime viewer knows that when you find a show you're not really into, you're supposed to watch each episode like clockwork, from start to finish, griping and flaming it all the way, just so that you can be all, "Oh, *that* show? Yeah, it totally sucks, I don't even know why I'm still watching it!"

It's the same with serialized comics! Even if you go on and on about how bad the magazine's been lately and how you basically don't even read it anymore, you've still gotta keep buying it week after week! That's what makes us good readers! It's an identity thing!

"Anyway, if you're gonna fight, do it outside. I'm going back to sleep," said Miss Satomi, shooing us out of the staff room.

"Miss Satomi certainly is a waste of a pretty face, isn't she?" commented Sagami as we filed into the hallway. There wasn't a trace of remorse in his tone, and he'd clearly learned nothing from her mini-lecture.

"Right?" I agreed, exactly as flippant as he was. "She'd be so much more charming if she acted like the teachers who show up in light novels all the time. Like, imagine if she were always worrying about her prospects for marriage or something!"

"Teachers are way out of my strike zone, so I really couldn't care less. Any girl who's past the age of twenty's an old hag in my book—excluding nonhuman waifus, of course."

Suddenly, I felt a *very* firm pressure on my shoulder. Somebody had grabbed on to both Sagami and me. I slowly, carefully turned around to find Miss Sagami directly behind us, her ever-slothful expression now laced with an unmistakable dose of pure, unrestrained malice.

"Here's another lesson for you two: if you're gonna bad-mouth someone, make sure to do it behind their back."

And so, we were dragged right back into the staff room…

In the end, I got off easier than Sagami this time around. Miss Satomi clearly had a lot more lecture left in her for him at the point she decided to let me go. Apparently, his "any girl who's past the age of twenty's a hag, excluding nonhuman waifus" declaration—which, incidentally, was a clear sign that he'd totally lost the ability to distinguish reality from fiction—had earned him her wrath. The fact that she was closing in on thirty might've had something to do with it.

As I strolled out into the hallway, I ran into another familiar face.

"Oh, if it isn't Andou!" said Sayumi, the president of the literary club I belonged to. "You were in the staff room? I was wondering where you'd gone off to."

"Hey, Sayumi," I replied. "What're you doing here? Oh, wait, I know! Were you searching for me?"

"No, I just have something to discuss with Miss Satomi. Try not to assume that everyone's actions revolve around you."

"I'll, uh, keep that in mind."

You'll note that she *didn't* say something along the lines of "Don't get the wrong idea!" Those sorts of phrases had become so intrinsically associated with the tsundere archetype lately that you couldn't really use them for their actual original purposes lest you cause a hilarious misunderstanding. Leave it to Sayumi to find a way around that problem—the line she'd just dropped on me was a *perfect* substitution that left absolutely no room for doubt regarding her intent! She wasn't about to let me misunderstand her in the slightest.

"Anyway," I continued, "you should probably save talking with her for another time. She's busy chewing out Sagami right now."

"Oh, Sagami, huh...? Yes, I understand." Sagami was well-known, in the worst possible sense of the phrase, so I wasn't shocked that Sayumi had heard of him. "I have to say, I'm impressed by how well you get along with him. It feels like the two of you are always together."

"Nah, not really. It'd be awkward to be the only ones eating lunch alone, so we sort of just end up sitting together. That's really all there is between us."

"Oh? I do believe that was a very 'tsundere' sort of response, wasn't it?"

"Please, do *not* call it that!"

I didn't *despise* the guy or anything, but when everyone around me refused to shut up about how well the two of us got along, it made me reflexively want to deny it. We just sort of ended up together, and that's really all there was to it. You could say that we were on the same wavelength, but our tastes were critically incompatible.

"I do have to say, though, the two of you certainly *look* like you're good friends."

"We're not, seriously! That guy's a total creeper, no two ways about it. Like, when we go to karaoke together, he sings *nothing* but anime and Vocaloid songs!"

"In other words, you're good friends."

"And when we went to go see a movie the other day, I ended up losing at rock paper scissors and he forced me to watch friggin' *Precure*, of all things! I wanted to see the latest *Kamen Rider* movie! I mean, it ended up being pretty good in the end, but still."

"In other words, you're *very* good friends."

Okay, she might have a point. From an outside perspective, we probably do look like we get along super well. Weird, that.

"I guess, like...he just comes on *so* strong, and I can't handle it. I'd rather be friends with someone who's got less of a stand-out personality, you know? Somebody I can count on to put *me* in the spotlight—like, the role the protagonist's best friend always ends up playing in light novels!"

"'The protagonist's best friend'?"

Allow me to explain! The protagonist's best friend is a stock character that appears with impressive frequency in light novels. To put it simply, their job is to be the protagonist's ultimate supporter, devoting their very

bodies and souls to the thankless task of ensuring the plot develops as planned.

Typically, they'll be cheerful, sociable, and astonishingly well-informed. When the protagonist turns out to be inexplicably clueless about their school's social circles, it's the best friend's job to painstakingly evaluate the heroines and pass along each and every rumor about them that comes the best friend's way.

In spite of the vital role they play in the plot, however, it's a best friend's tragic fate to fade into the background and barely interact with the story at all when it hits its endgame. They never overstep their boundaries, never let themselves obstruct the protagonist's or heroines' plot arcs, and remain supporting characters to the bitter end.

Such is the lot of the protagonist's best friend! I consider them to be one of the three pillars of light novels, along with awakenings and crane games.

"Oh, I think I understand now. In other words, both of you are excessively assertive when it comes to your preferences, and you end up clashing as a result."

"That's right!"

"That's almost tragic. Really, don't be like that! You have precious few male friends, and you need to treasure those relationships!"

Sayumi almost sounded like a real role model for a moment there, but then I noticed the quiet, almost inaudible chuckle she let out and the sort of unnerving smile on her face. I was struck with a terrible premonition. She wouldn't have gone out of her way to specify *male* friends if she wasn't thinking along the lines I suspected she was.

"Umm…Sayumi? Just for the record, there is absolutely nothing romantic going on between me and Sagami. Like, zip, zero, not in the slightest! Please don't turn us into some sort of fujoshi fantasy fodder, okay?"

I knew exactly how much of a BL fanatic Sayumi was, and I decided to nip that potential problem in the bud before it had the chance to bite me. I tried to keep my request casual and friendly, but Sayumi's smile vanished from her face in the blink of an eye.

"Andou," she said in an overwhelmingly serious tone of voice, "I'm *extremely* disappointed that you would look down on fujoshi so openly."

"You…what?"

"The idea that when a fujoshi sees two men getting along she'll inevitably start fantasizing about them being a couple is an incredibly played-out and downright rude stereotype. I believe you owe us an apology," she said with a (frankly terrifying) glare. She seemed genuinely angry. "I understand where your misapprehension is coming from. It's become more and more common recently for male-targeted media to feature fujoshi characters who can't restrain themselves from going to extremes for their interests. They, however, are characters written specifically to appeal to that male audience, and they are *nothing* like real-life fujoshi."

"*Nothing* like them? Not at all…?"

"As such, it's extremely upsetting when people assume that we're prone to the same sort of behavior as those characters. Surely you understand, Andou? If somebody implied that all nerds are overweight, flannel-clad man-children who wear silly bandannas and constantly carry around backpacks full of anime posters, you'd be upset too, wouldn't you?"

"I would, yeah." I was starting to understand what she was trying to say, more or less.

My idea of a typical fujoshi was an image that had been fed to me by media that wasn't written by or for fujoshi themselves. I had absolutely no interest in BL, and as a natural consequence of that fact, I didn't have many opportunities to get to know what real fujoshi are actually like. I only got exposed to the fictional ones and the major outliers who went so far beyond the pale with their hobby that they ended up getting posted about on the internet.

In short, Sayumi was asking me not to automatically lump her in with those eccentric outliers purely on the basis of her being a fujoshi. It was just like how *I* hated the idea of getting lumped into the same category as Sagami.

"I get it, Sayumi. You're saying that people who learn about fujoshi from fujoshi characters in anime are making the same mistake as people who learn about sex by watching porn!"

"That's...a rather apt comparison, yes, but I would highly recommend against bringing up porn apropos of nothing when you're speaking with a woman." She gave me a cold, unblinking stare for a moment, then she let out a weary sigh. "People have a hard time picking out the distinguishing details of things they have no interest in, so it might be inevitable that everyone has some form of prejudice or another. Still, though, I'd hoped that at least *you* would understand me, Andou."

"Sayumi…you're right, and I'm sorry." She was smiling, but in an almost tragic sort of way that tugged at my heartstrings like nothing else. I found myself apologizing before I even knew it. *Jeez, I can't believe I said something that mean without even thinking about it.*

"All that said," Sayumi continued, "you *were* actually right. I absolutely *was* envisioning you and Sagami in the throes of passion, and I happened to let a chuckle slip out of pure carelessness."

"Oh, come on!" That whole friggin' ramble was just a lead-in?! That was way too long to set up a stupid joke! I was actually completely sincere about that apology too!

"Oh, to be clear, I *did* mean everything I said. I wouldn't fantasize about just anyone. I restrict my delusions solely to the very few ships I've analyzed in scrupulous detail and have determined to be too good to *not* drool over."

"That makes this *so much worse*, holy crap! What, you're saying that me and Sagami make the best ship ever, or something?!"

"Frankly, I can't get enough of it."

“Frankly, what the hell?! And no, wait a second…you *were* listening when I explained that Sagami and I aren’t super close or anything, right? Like, we may be more than just acquaintances, but we’re definitely not even close to being friends.”

“I’m afraid you just don’t understand, Andou. From a fujoshi’s perspective, a pair of boys who are constantly quarreling and snapping at each other is a thousand times more shippable than a pair that’s excessively all over each other.”

“H-Huh, really? Is that how it works?”

“Quite! If anything, the best ships are between two characters who hate each other, at least a little. When they’re prone to breaking out in fights the moment they make eye contact, but deep in their hearts, the flames of love smolder…*that* is the sort of ship it’s most fun to fantasize about.”

The conversation was veering into dangerously deep waters, and I had a feeling it was time to bring it to a close before I found myself drowning. I decided to try to change the subject, hoping it would send the message that fujoshi talk time was at an end.

“Anyway, wanna head to the club room, Sayumi?”

“Yes, we probably should. Everyone except you was already there when I left, and I imagine they’re getting tired of waiting for us.”

Under normal circumstances, there wouldn’t be anything to wait for. Our literary club made a point of never bothering with typical club activities, so if somebody showed up late, it usually wouldn’t be an inconvenience for the rest of the members at all. That particular day, however, was different: it was the chosen day for our monthly superpower checkup.

An innumerable quantity of jet-black spears materialized in the air, blotting out the blue sky above. They rained down upon the ashen landscape, filling every inch of it with terrifyingly sharp blades.

This transparently lethal attack was but one of *World Create*’s many combat applications. Specifically, it was the second form of the twenty-fourth verse of the Book of Assault: *Spear Tempest*!

The countless spears, birthed by the power of Genesis, perforated the ground with a piercing, clamorous crash. Said ground, incidentally—and for that matter, the entire arena—was a *Field* that had been created by way of that very same power. Littered with spears, the battlefield had been transformed into a metallic forest in the blink of an eye.

In the center of that forest, a single, circular clearing remained entirely untouched. A girl stood at the very center of that circle, smiling brightly and chuckling fearlessly. Not a single spear had so much as grazed her—she was completely unharmed. Indeed, she was the spitting image of Alexander the Great, one of humanity’s oldest and grandest of heroes, who is said to have once walked through a volley of arrows and emerged on the other side completely unscathed.

How did she escape from all but certain doom? By means of one of *Over Element*'s Sylpheed Mode techniques: *Fairy Dance*! By cloaking herself in a barrier of wind, she'd rendered herself utterly impervious to attack! Insubstantial though air may be, a strong enough gale can brush aside even the strongest of blows!

It hadn't even taken all that much in the way of force. Her mastery over the air around her allowed her to alter the trajectories of any incoming spears *just* enough to deflect them. To an observer like me, it almost seemed as though the spears themselves had steered around her of their own volition.

"I was actually planning on burning them all up at first! But then I noticed they looked like they'd be hard to burn, so I changed up my plan a bit!" declared the wind-cloaked girl, Kushikawa Hatoko. She smiled proudly as she explained her decision to the foe across the arena from her, Himeki Chifuyu.

"You burned up all the weapons I threw at you last time, so I thought I'd use metal spears instead so it wouldn't work this time…" In contrast to Hatoko's smile, Chifuyu looked a little upset. She must've been disappointed that the attack she'd thought so hard about had been countered so easily, and she sullenly kicked her legs in the air from atop the magnificent, almost throne-like chair she'd conjured up for herself.

That was Chifuyu's fighting style, incidentally. She would make an elegant, luxurious chair, sit down, and not budge so much as an inch for the rest of the battle. It was an incredibly cheeky—not to mention lazy—way of doing battle, but she had the sheer ability to let her get away with it.

"Hiyah!" shouted Hatoko, gently waving her hand in the air and stirring up an enormous whirlwind around her. The raging gale swept the spears away, casting them off into the distance and clearing the battlefield in one fell swoop. Her gaze met Chifuyu's once more.

"Okay, Chifuyu, here goes!" said Hatoko, taking a moment to stretch and catch her breath.

"C'mon," replied Chifuyu, beckoning her foe forward with a finger.

Mere moments later, *World Create* and *Over Element* clashed together in a cacophony of violence!

"No way…Hatoko's not seriously planning on using *that*, is she? Not *Over Element*'s Ifrit Mode Technique: *Raging*—ah, wait! I-It couldn't be! Not *World Create's* ninth verse from the Book of Aegis, the form of—wait, what on earth?! Hatoko's using her *Geyser of*—oh, but no, Chifuyu countered it with her trump card: the first form of the first verse of the Book of Respite, *Wakeless Woodland*—no, it *couldn't* be!"

"Your commentary's not keeping up with the fight at all!" jabbed Tomoyo, who'd been sitting beside me since the beginning.

I slammed my fist onto the table in an overblown show of frustration. "Well, it's not *my* fault their fight's moving so friggin' fast! It doesn't matter how quickly I talk; I'll never be able to keep up with *that*!"

“Then just give up, please. Battle manga-style exposition just doesn’t work in real life.”

“Ha! As if I’d ever surrender! If I don’t explain their fight, Hatoko and Chifuyu’s attack names will remain an eternal mystery!”

“Just for the record, if you’d made those names at least a little bit less ridiculously long, you might’ve stood more of a chance of keeping up with your commentary.”

I couldn’t argue with that one. But, like, come on! Once you start thinking up attack names, it’s really hard to stop! Who *doesn’t* want to have a borderline limitless number of attacks with really long names to pull out at a moment’s notice? *Super long attack names: hella cool!*

“You’ve got a point, though, Tomoyo. It’s probably a good idea to avoid using attacks with long names when you’re fighting a real battle. It leaves you wide open, and there’s a very real danger that the attack will end up finishing before you’re even done saying its name!”

“Okay, even assuming that superpowered battles *did* actually happen in real life, nobody would bother shouting out the names of their attacks in the first place.”

Oh. Yeah, that’s fair. The whole calling your attacks thing really only happens in manga, anime and light novels. Not even Kamen Riders bother shouting attack names much, and even when they do, it doesn’t really get much attention. Like, Kiva had this ridiculously cool super-kick called the Darkness Moon Break, but barely anybody even knows about it these days!

Then again, asking why fictional characters bother calling out their attack names each and every time is one of those nitpicks that you’re supposed to sorta just let slide. It goes hand in hand with not questioning why the villains always go out of their way to explain exactly how their abilities work to the hero.

“And besides,” continued Tomoyo, “it’s not like we ever actually have any reason to fight in the first place. We don’t need *attacks*, much less attack names! Hatoko and Chifuyu are just playing around right now.”

“What?! This isn’t a game! It’s a simulation! By taking part in mock battles so intense they’re almost indistinguishable from the real thing, we’re honing our instincts and preparing for the day our skills are put to the test!”

“Yeah, sure. And what comic did you steal *that* line from?”

“Listen up, Tomoyo. I assure you, I’m being *completely*, one hundred percent serious when I say that settling on names for your attacks and special moves in advance is *incredibly* important.”

“Oh, really? Lemme guess: you’re about to tell me something hilariously superficial, like how it’s important because if you don’t have them picked out beforehand, you won’t be able to sell the scene when you get your moment in the spotlight. Right?”

“Nay! It’s important because if you don’t, you’ll give the devs a really hard time when your story gets turned into a video game.”

“Why are you *planning* for that?!”

“A fighting game’s the best option if you want it to sell well, and you can’t make a fighting game if you don’t have any special moves! *Gintama* did a whole self-parody bit about it, remember?”

“And you’re citing *Gintama*?!”

“So, I’ve been thinking it’s about time I take up this wooden sword with ‘Lake Toya’ written on it and learn a special move of my own.”

“Who are you, Gin?!”

“Or maybe a special move that uses this naturally white and curly hair of mine.”

“Yep, that’s Gin, all right! Why are you committing this hard to doing a *Gintama* joke?!”

“’Cause *Gintama* uses so much reference humor itself, I figure there’s no way I’d get in trouble for parodying it.”

“Quit plotting to make your jokes consequence-free!”

“If you parody people, they’ll parody you back.”

“Don’t you *dare* bring *Shaman King* into this!”

Okay, I’m actually really impressed she realized I was paraphrasing one of Asakura Yoh’s most famous lines there. I can always rest easy knowing somebody’ll pick up on even the deepest of cuts when she’s around.

As Tomoyo and I bantered away with each other, I turned my gaze back to the battlefield.

Our supernatural power checkup was a monthly event where all of us got together and put our abilities to the test. We had all awakened to strange, inexplicable powers half a year beforehand. One of us had gained the power to rule over time, one had gained mastery over the elements, one had gained the power of ultimate creation, one had gained the power to return things to the way they were meant to be—and one had gained the power to conquer chaos itself.

Okay…that last one *might* have been an ever so slight exaggeration, but only a little! No need to think too deeply about it.

Moving right along, the point is that we’d all awakened to phenomenal superpowers, but nothing else of any particular importance had actually happened. Broadly speaking, we were still living out the same happy, fulfilling, utterly mundane school lives as ever. As such, we’d taken to using our powers however we wanted to, with one notable exception: these monthly checkups, where we’d report on our powers’ progress and relay any new information we’d gathered.

At that particular moment, Hatoko and Chifuyu were engaged in a supernatural sparring match to see whether their powers had changed at all over the course of the prior month. The rest of us were sitting off to the side and watching them throw down.

The *Field* in which the match was taking place, of course, was a product of Chifuyu’s power. She’d temporarily knocked out one of the club room’s walls and linked it to an extradimensional space of her own creation,

allowing us to lounge around in the comfort of our own room in our own chairs as their battle unfolded.

"Watching those two fight it out never fails to impress, does it?" noted Sayumi with an unmistakable hint of admiration in her tone. She'd been off in the far corner of the room brewing tea, which she brought over to the table.

"Right?" I agreed as I accepted a cup.

Frankly, Hatoko and Chifuyu's battle was some seriously next-level stuff. *Over Element* and *World Create* were the two most flashy powers in our group by a mile, and when Hatoko and Chifuyu sparred, it very quickly approached the level of combat you'd expect to turn up in some epic myth.

On one side of the ring, we had the overwhelming power of nature itself. On the other, we had the almighty power of civilization. The fundamental building blocks of the universe were stacked up against an inexhaustible supply of man's most lethal armaments, pulled from all ages and civilizations. When those two powers clashed together, "battle" hardly did the spectacle justice. Nay—it was a *war*.

And a ridiculously cool one, at that! God, I am so friggin' jealous! I wanna be part of a super crazy, all-out battle too!

"Okay!" Hatoko said with a chuckle as she called forth a thick wall of rock from the ground, blocking the barrel of the 88 mm antiaircraft flak cannon that Chifuyu had made moments earlier. "I think it's time to show off the special trick I've been saving!"

The rock wall vanished as Hatoko spread her arms wide open. On some instinctual level, I could tell what she was doing: she was focusing on two different types of power at once, directing one of them into her right hand and the other into her left.

"Put fire and earth together, and you geeet..." Hatoko crouched down, planting both of her hands on the ground and channeling their contrasting elements simultaneously. "*Maaagma*!"

The ground rumbled with a thunderous crash.

"Wh-What?!" I exclaimed, leaping to my feet. "N-No...she *wouldn't*!" My voice trembled with fear as I forced the words out, one after another...and glanced over to the girl sitting beside me. "Of all the moves to make...I can't believe she'd go with *that*!"

Glance. "Dammit, *that*, really?! *That*...?"

Glance. "That! That! Thaaat!"

"Oh my god, *please*, shut *up*!" My persistence finally got the better of Tomoyo, who'd been doing her damndest to ignore me. "I don't *care* how much you want me to say something like '*That*?! You know what she's doing, Andou?!' It's not happening! Stop looking at me like that!"

"Oh, come on! You can't do commentary on a battle without somebody on the sidelines asking you questions. The least you could do is help out with that!"

“Not happening! Commentate all you want, but don’t try to drag me into it!”

What a killjoy. The ideal way for that to play out would’ve been for everyone to beg me for an explanation, but tragically, absolutely nobody was interested in hearing my commentary in the slightest. That left me with no choice but to just go ahead and do it on my own initiative.

“Mwa ha ha! It seems we’ll have a rare chance to bear witness to *Over Element*’s true potential: the Aspect Splice!” By combining two elements of differing aspects, Hatoko could enhance the destructive power of both of them! She was the only one in our club who could hope to pull off such a feat. “*Over Element: Kagutsuchi Mode Technique: Blazing Stratum*!”

“Hey, Andou?” said Tomoyo. “I know you’re really satisfied about getting to shout that technique name, and I’m sorry to burst your bubble, but the fight moved on from that bit ages ago.”

“It did?!” Damnations! Looks like expositing on this battle’s a lost cause.

I looked back to the battleground, and I was surprised to find that nothing in particular was happening at all. No…it *looked* like nothing was happening, but the moment I noticed how fiercely the two of them were concentrating, I realized I was wrong. The arena was calm at a glance, but behind closed doors—nay, *beneath the surface*, the battle still raged on.

If Hatoko’s move had gone as planned, the moment she’d laid hands upon the ground, the earth would’ve roared, the battlefield would’ve been cleaved in twain, and a geyser of red-hot magma would’ve erupted from the crevasse. The almighty Empress of Genesis across the field from her, however, had no intention of letting that happen.

As best as I could tell, for every layer of earth Hatoko’s magma surged through, Chifuyu was creating another stratum to hold it down. She was effectively putting a lid on the eruption, over and over again.

“*World Create*’s most dangerous attribute isn’t the breadth or number of weapons it can create,” I exposited. “No—its most fearsome trait by far is the *speed* of its powers of creation!”

If Chifuyu felt like it, she could activate her power literally instantaneously. Rapid-fire activations were a snap as well. Her power could be overtly flashy in other ways, but it wouldn’t do to let yourself get tricked by that initial impression. Just like a certain Bankai that had an effective range of up to thirteen kilometers (a personal favorite of mine, by the way), what really made her power incredible was its speed—a far less immediately obvious factor.

Hatoko furrowed her brow as she realized that her magma attack had been foiled. “You’re pretty good, Chifuyu,” she begrudgingly admitted.

“I haven’t even started yet.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I haven’t even started yet either!”

“I haven’t even started starting yet.”

From an outside perspective, it really did look like they were just staring at each other, but just beneath them, two impossibly powerful forces were

vying for supremacy, one pushing up and the other bearing down. It was a pure, head-on battle of brute force, and the victor would be determined by who had the stamina to hold out the longest. The second either of them lost focus, the match would be decided.

I paused for a moment. It was beginning to dawn on me that Hatoko and Chifuyu might've been taking their sparring match a little *too* seriously. The point was to measure their powers' growth and development, so they didn't have to go *that* all out, did they?

Yeah, I think it's time to pull the plug. Don't want them taking it too far and getting hurt—that'd be a disaster! We have Sayumi around to undo any injuries, of course, but that's no excuse to get complacent about getting hurt. That said, jumping into the middle of this ridiculous joke of a battle's way beyond me, that's for sure...

While I was busy worrying, somebody else took the initiative. "Tomoyo?" said Sayumi. She spoke quietly, not standing up or even making any particular gestures. She just gave Tomoyo a look.

"Got it." Tomoyo nodded without asking for so much as a word of clarification—and then she disappeared.

"Okay, you two. Playtime's over," she said, suddenly standing in the middle of the battlefield with her arms crossed.

"Huh? Whaaa?" stammered Hatoko, who'd been turned upside-down before she knew it. She was still in the same pose as before, only now with her back on the ground and her hands up in the air. She looked sorta like an overturned turtle.

"Uh...?" grunted Chifuyu, whose chair had been turned to face the opposite direction. Suddenly she was staring off at the horizon, and she didn't seem to know what to make of it. Both combatants' concentration had been thoroughly disrupted, of course, and the ground's rumbling quickly faded away.

"You guys were both going *way* too hard!" Tomoyo scolded. "This is just a check-in! You don't have to take it *that* seriously, do you?"

"Tomoyo..." muttered Hatoko, looking a bit chagrined. "Heh heh, sorry. I guess I got a little too into the moment."

"I did too, a little," admitted Chifuyu.

It was like we'd been watching a video that had skipped a few seconds, shunting us from mere moments before the battle's climax to several seconds after its resolution. This could only be the work of Kanzaki Tomoyo's power, *Closed Clock*. She could stroll right into the most savage and violent of clashes with ease. No matter how absurdly fast the action was taking place, to a girl who ruled over time itself, it would look like it was standing still—because to her, it literally would be.

"Good effort out there, Hatoko, Chifuyu," I said as they returned to the club room. "You too, Tomoyo."

"It's not like *I* put in any effort, really," Tomoyo casually quipped in response.

“Really? But wasn’t it super hard to move the two of them while time was stopped?” I hadn’t meant anything by the question, really, but Tomoyo stiffened up with a little grunt-like gasp, her eyes wide.

When she stopped time, the rest of us perceived anything she did as happening instantaneously. We only saw the result, which made *Closed Clock* one of the most ridiculously cool powers out there to see in action. For Tomoyo herself, though, it was a lot more of an ordeal to pull that sort of stuff off.

Most likely, the second after she’d stopped time, she’d dashed out into the arena, gone to great effort to flip Hatoko over, gone to even *greater* effort to spin Chifuyu around, chair and all, then finally gone to the trouble of sprinting back out in between them, just so she could pull off a pose the second her power disengaged.

Man... Now that I’m imagining it, that’s actually kinda heartwarming. Tomoyo’s never had much in the way of muscle, and human beings aren’t exactly light, even if they are schoolgirls. Moving both of them must’ve really winded her, but she still managed to catch her breath in time, fold her arms, and drop a “playtime’s over” on top of it all. What do I even call that? Hamming it up? Putting on airs? In any case, all I can say is: man.

“Ah, now that you mention it, that’s true!” agreed Hatoko. “You put in some hard work out there too, huh, Tomoyo? Good work!”

“Nice, Tomoyo,” Chifuyu chimed in.

“Ah, n-no, I didn’t—d-don’t thank me! It’s weird! I-I didn’t work hard or anything at all!” shouted Tomoyo. Hatoko and Chifuyu’s genuine appreciation had thrown her into a panic.

“But, you know—why *did* you go out of your way to move us like that?” Hatoko asked, cocking her head curiously. “You didn’t have to bother, did you? We would’ve stopped the moment you came out here anyway!”

Tomoyo’s face flushed red in an instant. She tried to stammer a reply, but couldn’t get so much as a word out.

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Ahh, here we go again. I guess it's time for me to step up to the plate and throw Tomoyo a lifeline. After all, I understand exactly why she did it that way.

"Don't be stupid, Hatoko! You can't ask *why* when people do stuff like that—you'll spoil her whole act!"

"Her 'act'?"

"Yeah! She did it to show off her power, duh! Most likely, she was thinking something along the lines of 'Oh, man, if this were a manga, they'd totally pull out a two-page spread for this moment!' or whatever."

"Huh? But why would she do something like that?"

"'Cause it's cool! Anyway, that's more than enough picking her act apart for now. We should just keep quiet so she can bask in it for a little. Let her have this!"

"I can *hear* you, dumbass!" Something slammed into the back of my head. All of a sudden, I had a newfound appreciation for the phrase "no good deed goes unpunished."

"Quit acting all *considerate* about this!" she yelled. "It makes it *so much worse*!"

"Look, Tomoyo," I said, turning around to face my attacker. "I get you. I really do! I know *exactly* what you're going through right now. If I could stop time, I'd want to show it off like that too! I'd put on an act so terrifying that nobody would *dare* to approach me, no matter how badly they wanted to kick my ass!"

"Please, stop trying to comfort me... Don't *sympathize* with me... Just laugh already, get it over with..." moaned Tomoyo. All sorts of complicated emotions were flashing across her face all at once. I could imagine she was feeling pretty darn conflicted, considering she was someone who used to share my particular sense of aesthetics and showmanship. "A-And besides, Sayumi's the one who started it!"

"Oh? Am I?"

"Yeah, you are! You asked me to break them up, and you did it in a way that made you look like a super calm, collected, final boss sorta character who ordered her subordinate to do the dirty work since she couldn't be bothered! And I sorta got caught up in that whole image, and...well..."

I got where she was coming from. The way Sayumi had gotten the point across while barely saying a word *was* super friggin' cool. She'd played out the ideal that every club president should aspire to...but apparently, that impression of mine had been hopelessly off base.

"No, actually, all I wanted to say was 'Tomoyo, be careful—your teacup's about to fall off the table.' That's all."

Tomoyo's jaw dropped. "Y-You—*what*?"

"But before I could finish my sentence, you said 'got it,' gave me the most confident little nod, and vanished without giving me the chance to get a word in edgewise. Frankly, I almost panicked."

Ooof! The shame! Talk about a humiliating misunderstanding! I'd misunderstood right along with her, of course, but Tomoyo's the one who actually took action, so it was up to her to bear the brunt of the embarrassment.

She wasn't bearing it very well, though. In fact, she was kinda just groaning incoherently. I'd never seen her get driven *that* far up against a wall before. She clutched at her head, face shifting from flushed to pale and back again, trembling violently.

"I get it!" shouted Chifuyu, breaking into the conversation. Her eyes glimmered with a light that spoke of a sudden revelation. "I understand now!"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Understand what?"

"I understand all that stuff you told me the other day!"

Chifuyu trotted over to Tomoyo, whose self-respect was clearly teetering on the brink of absolute ruin. Chifuyu looked up at her, then began to slowly speak.

"You worked really hard, but you said you didn't. You tried to act cool in weird ways you saw in manga, and you said stuff that sounded like cool lines you'd read in a manga too. That means…"

Chifuyu pointed a little finger directly at Tomoyo's face.

"Tomoyo, you're a chuuni!"

"*Ugyaaaugh*!" Convulsions wracked Tomoyo's body. The damage she'd taken was so critical, she crumpled to her knees.

Chifuyu had a really hard time figuring out the whole chuuni concept when we'd explained it to her a little while back, but apparently, Tomoyo had just inadvertently helped her come to terms with it. Normally, I'd call that a good thing, but I could only imagine the sort of existential crisis that being the trigger for Chifuyu's revelation was causing Tomoyo to go through.

Tomoyo tottered over to a corner of the club room in a stupor, sat down on the floor, and clutched her knees to her chest in the fetal position. There was no doubt about it: Chifuyu had dealt the killing blow to her psyche.

"T-Tomoyo?" I said, reflexively walking over to check on her. "You okay?"

A moment of silence passed before she droned, "I'm never using my power again." I could practically see dark clouds of gloom looming over her, and her cheeks were puffed out in a sullen frown.

Ahh, yup, she's in hardcore sulk mode. We should probably just leave her alone for now. I wandered back over to the rest of my clubmates.

"How about we get back to our power checkup for now?" I suggested. We'd drifted way off topic for quite a long while, but that *was* our whole objective for the day, in theory. "How was it, Hatoko? Did anything feel different this time around?"

"Hmm… Nope, it was just like always! Aspect Splicing's still a little tough, but I can *just* manage it if I focus really hard. Oh, and using water

right after I use fire or using wind right after I use earth is still pretty hard too."

"So, using opposing elements in succession still makes them harder to pull off, huh? I'm starting to think that's not gonna change, no matter how much you practice."

"Hmm…are you really sure about that? I haven't been practicing at all, so how would we know?"

"Fair point. What about you, Chifuyu? Anything change?"

"Nothing. It was all normal."

"Gotcha…" I sighed. "Sheesh, nothing *ever* changes, does it? Makes me wonder if there's even any point in keeping these checkups going."

We'd been doing them every month like clockwork ever since our powers had awakened, but as of yet, they hadn't revealed so much as a single real development. There were slight variations from trial to trial, but those seemed to depend more on how well-rested we were and what sort of state of mind we were in than anything else. Measurement errors, basically. As far as *real* improvement or deterioration went, we hadn't noticed a thing.

"Though, then again, since we haven't done any real fighting or training, I guess it makes sense we haven't improved," I mused. "Right, Sayumi?"

"Quite. Although I feel I should note that there's no particular need for us to improve our powers in the first place," she dryly agreed.

For better or worse, we had no driving objective. That meant we had no reason to polish our abilities at all. We'd quickly reached the conclusion that if we were going to spend time practicing anything, focusing on our schoolwork would be way more productive than anything involving our powers. All the girls' powers were already so outlandishly godlike I couldn't even imagine *how* they'd get any more powerful than they already were, anyway.

"And all that said," Sayumi continued, "even if we wanted our powers to develop, we don't know how to go about making that happen." She had a point. It would've been nice if there were some simple, readily understandable system driving their growth—like if our mastery of our powers improved every time we used them—but all available evidence suggested that wasn't the case. "After all, Andou, you've been using your power at the drop of a hat ever since you obtained it, and it hasn't developed in the slightest."

Ooof, that one stung. Again, though, she was right. I'd played around with—*ahem*, made effective use of my power more than anyone. I was constantly striving to take my ability to new heights, but its actual output hadn't improved in the least.

"Dammit... Now I know how it feels to be the one member of your crew who actually bothers working out but somehow never seems to get any stronger than any of your fellow crewmates..."

"The idea of you comparing yourself to a certain legendary swordmaster is absolutely laughable. Stop," said Sayumi with a cold, biting glare. "In any

case, these checkups may be fruitless, yes, but I would personally vote to continue them regardless. They hardly take much time or effort, and we don't lose anything by carrying them out. There's also a chance that we'll be able to identify aspects of our powers' potential that we'd never notice on our own. An outside perspective is always helpful in that respect."

I couldn't think of any reason to object to Sayumi's logic, and I nodded in agreement. Hatoko and Chifuyu agreed as well.

"All right then, how about we check out your power next, Sayumi?" I suggested. "Though I guess for you, there's not much we can do other than ask you how it's been lately."

"Quite, and I've noticed no changes in particular. As you can see…"

Sayumi walked over to Hatoko and Chifuyu and laid one hand on each of their uniforms, which were rather disheveled from their battle. An instant later, they were so fresh and clean they looked almost brand new. That was Sayumi's power, *Route of Origin*: the power to return things to the way they were meant to be.

"…my power is working as well as ever," she concluded with a shrug and a smile. Hatoko and Chifuyu quickly thanked her for cleaning them up.

Sayumi's ability was probably the most unique out of all of ours, to the point that it was actually pretty hard to explain in succinct terms. As a result, the idea of her power getting stronger or weaker didn't exactly make sense. The concepts didn't even seem to apply to her, really.

The ability to return things to how they were meant to be had virtually no potential as far as direct attacks went. It might sound like I'm talking her down when I put it this way, but it was undeniably a purely defensive power. I wouldn't even know how to go about measuring stuff like its level of output or speed of activation, so her part of the superpower checkups tended to be over in a couple sentences. This time was no exception—we were already set to move on to the next member.

"Guess Tomoyo's up next. Heeey, Tomoyo!"

Seconds passed. No reply. It had been a few minutes since she'd taken up her fetal position in the corner, but she still hadn't budged an inch. Her emotional wounds this time might've been deeper than I'd given them credit for.

"Psst! Hey, Juu! Why's Tomoyo so upset?" asked Hatoko.

"That's kinda hard to explain, honestly… Let's just say that she's locked in a pitched battle with her own past self. That girl, I swear—she'd have a way easier time of it if she unleashed her deep-seated impulses and let them run rampant!"

"What would happen then?"

"Mwa ha ha! She would join me in the ranks of those who have been chosen by fate, that's what!"

"Ooh. I hope she doesn't, then. I don't want Tomoyo to end up like you."

“Wow, jeez! That was a really casual way to say something really nasty… But, well, whatever. Hey, Chifuyu? Sorry, but would you mind apologizing to Tomoyo? You don’t have to actually mean it.”

“Huh?” Chifuyu cocked her head. “I should say I’m sorry?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t have to be a *real* apology, like I said—just go up to her and say ‘I’m sorry for telling the truth.’ I’ll buy you some candy sometime if you do, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Umm…Andou?” said Sayumi. “You *do* realize that’s liable to make Tomoyo feel even worse, don’t you?”

“Nah, it’ll be fine. Pretty sure she’s already bounced back, anyway.”

“How’s that?”

“I figure she actually got over it ages ago, but since she made such a big show out of getting depressed, it’d feel really awkward to rejoin the conversation like nothing happened, so she’s been pretending to still be upset this whole time.”

“I see… When you put it that way, that *is* perfectly plausible. Tomoyo always makes an effort to act calm and aloof, but she *can* be surprisingly prone to attention-seeking when all is said and done.”

“We just have to give her a chance to jump back into the group. I bet she’s going out of her mind waiting for someone to say something to her right about now.”

“Yes, I believe you’re right about that. The fetal position practically screams ‘I’m depressed, please comfort me,’ after all.”

“Ha ha ha, I know, right? Okay, Chifuyu, think you can go fake an apology to the needy little drama queen in the corner over—”

“I can *hear* you, dammit!” Tomoyo appeared in front of me and smacked me upside the head. Or, rather, Tomoyo appeared in front of me having *already* smacked me upside the head.

“Ow! Jeez, Tomoyo!” So much for never using your power again!

“I can’t take any more of this crap!” Tomoyo wailed. “Just how much do you have to rub it in before you’re satisfied?! You could at least have your stupid little strategy meeting somewhere where I can’t hear you!”

“Man, and here I was thinking you’d be *grateful* we were trying to spare your feelings…”

“Sometimes, sparing somebody’s feelings is the most hurtful thing you can possibly do to them!” Tomoyo’s shoulders heaved as she gasped for breath, her face flushed bright red. Finally, she let out a long, beleaguered sigh and corrected her posture. “Whatever! I’m done with this! We’re moving on, already! I’m next, right? Let’s just get this over with!”

Carrying on that conversation for any longer was clearly just going to make it worse, so I decided not to object to Tomoyo’s attempt to brush it off. We all gathered around her.

“All right, Tomoyo! Whenever you’re ready!” I said. We measured her power by one simple metric: how long she could keep time stopped in a single activation of her power.

“Okay, here goes—forty-seven. And, that’s it! Looks like a bit less than forty-seven seconds today.”

“I know it’s *always* fast, but dang, that never stops surprising me!”

Her power really was consistently astonishing. The moment she said “here goes,” Tomoyo had stopped time and started counting out loud. Her power deactivated just an instant before she got to forty-seven, and to us, of course, it looked like no time at all had passed in between.

“Forty-seven seconds, huh?” I repeated. “Guess that’s about average.”

“I mean, in *theory*, yeah, but my sense of time isn’t exactly perfect. I’m probably not counting at the same exact speed every time, so who knows how far off I am.”

“Stopping time means stopping all the clocks, so not much you can do about that.”

The length of *Closed Clock*’s time stop effect varied considerably depending on Tomoyo’s condition on any given day. Typically, it fell somewhere in the range of thirty seconds to a minute in duration. Considering the nature of its effect, though, we had absolutely no way to gather data about it other than Tomoyo’s own personal reports, which not even she considered a hundred percent reliable.

Only Tomoyo could perceive what happened when she brought the world to a standstill. Clocks and stopwatches froze right along with time, of course, so the best that we could do was trust in her ability to count out loud. *Man. The power to stop time is surprisingly fiddly in a lot of ways.*

“Well then, I believe that concludes our examination of everyone’s powers,” said Sayumi, clapping her hands together. “It’s time to bring our club’s sixth monthly superpower checkup to a close.”

“Yup, nice work, everyone!” I said, kicking off the usual wrap-up speech. “Let’s all take care to keep our superpowers in check, even after the checkup’s over! Just because we’re finished for today doesn’t mean we can stop paying attention to our development! See you all again at the seventh monthly…hey, wait a minute!”

I played along until the last second before finally slamming the brakes. Let it never be said that I’m not cooperative when it comes to other people’s comedy bits!

“Hold up a second, Sayumi! What sort of played out joke do you think you’re pulling?! We’re not done yet—we still haven’t made it to the main event!”

“Oh, Andou. I didn’t realize you were still here.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?! Of course I am, and this checkup isn’t over yet! I haven’t used *my* power yet!”

“Oh, that was a *From the Northern Country* reference, wasn’t it? How very clever.”

“No, it wasn’t! I just happened to use a phrasing that sounded sorta similar to a line from the show! Totally unintentional!”

“Oh, is that so? In that case, you need to be more careful. You have to commit to your parodies. If you’re going to do one, then do it, but if you’re not, then don’t make it sound like you might be! If you don’t make these things extremely clear, people will think you’re just ripping the source material off.”

Was this really the moment to lecture me on parody theory, Sayumi? “Fair enough, but not the point! We can’t come this far and wrap it up without checking *all* of our powers, can we? Haven’t you skipped over an extremely important member of the club?”

“Have I? And who might that be?”

“Me! It’s me! *Me*!”

“Rigaton-*me*,” said Chifuyu, jumping into the conversation at the weirdest possible moment.

“Uhh, Chifuyu?” I said after hesitating for a moment. “We’re kind of in the middle of something here. Do you think you could save the unfunny surrealism for later?”

“It wasn’t funny…?”

“Gah! No, sorry, I didn’t mean it! Don’t get upset! It was super hilarious! You’re such a kidder!”

“Really…?”

“Yeah, really! I’m seriously gonna die of laughter! Literally busting a gut over here!”

“Okay, then. One more time.”

“Huh?”

“I wanna do it again. You first.”

“Me…first? Oh, umm—M-Me, it’s me! *Me*!”

“Macaro-*me*.”

“…”

“…”

“Sooo…Chifuyu?”

“Yeah?”

“Was that good enough?”

“Yeah. I’m done now.”

“Awesome. If that’s good enough for you, it’s good enough for me…”

And now I’m tired… A wave of exhaustion washed over me all at once. Dealing with Chifuyu, the ultimate free spirit, always really took a chunk out of my mental stamina bar.

“Well then, I think that’s just about enough messing with Andou for the moment,” said Sayumi. “Let’s move on to his checkup, shall we?”

“Okaaay,” the other members reluctantly droned. Everything about their tone screamed that, to them, this was an unpleasant obligation to be suffered through, but I couldn’t care less about their bad attitudes.

“Mwa ha ha…” A dauntless grin spread across my face. The time has finally come—this is my moment! It was worth waiting and holding back until the very last second!

“Mwa ha ha, mwaaa ha ha ha ha ha! Yes, indeed—it’s only right that we’d save *me* for the final round!” Note: “the final round,” not just “last.” Very important distinction. “Very well, then! Allow me to demonstrate the power that some call the Umbral Tempest!”

Tomoyo sighed. “*Another* title? Really?”

“You sure love the word tempest, don’t you, Juu?” added Hatoko curiously.

Do I *really* need to even explain why the word “tempest” is so amazingly cool? It sort of goes without saying, right? By which I mean, I’m not sure I could explain it even if I wanted to. Just what is it about that word that resonates so deeply within the core of my being? Whatever it is, I can say this with certainty: tempests are *hella* cool.

“‘Kay, here I go!” I stood at the center of attention and raised my right arm up in front of me.

“I am he who conquers chaos! O purgatorial flame that sways upon the brink of the Abyss, O twisted blaze of sable darkness, blighted crimson of deepest night! O howling, maddening inferno that paves the road to oblivion! Fetter sin with sin, pierce my being with thine onyx sigil, and bare thine fangs at the arrogance of providence! *Dark and Dark*!”

A jet-black blaze flared up from the palm of my hand. It danced in the air, twisting, flickering, and coiling about itself. It burned fiercely, yet it had a certain frailty to it as well—truly a manifestation of my very self.

“Oh, *Dark and Dark*… Tonight, your flames burn darker and lovelier than ever…”

“Okay, everyone, time for the usual,” said Sayumi, totally ignoring me as I reveled in my superpower’s unearthly beauty. The others followed her example, carrying out their part of my power’s checkup.

Each member of the literary club walked up and stuck a hand into my blazing black inferno. That would be insane if *Dark and Dark* burned like a normal flame—they’d end up with major burns, at the very least—but it was, well…suffice to say that it, uhh, was fire of a very particular and peculiar composition. No matter *what* part of your body you shoved into it, you wouldn’t get burned in the least.

As my clubmates got a taste of my flame most foul, they each gave a quick impression of it.

“Kinda tepid.”

“Warm, I’d say!”

“Lukewarm, at the absolute most.”

“Lukewarm.”

The verdict was unanimous: *Dark and Dark* wasn’t hot by any conceivable standard.

“You can’t be serious…” I said, stunned. “No, that can’t be right. Try it again, guys! It’s gotta feel a *little* hotter than last time, right?”

“Wrong. It’s exactly the same as ever,” Tomoyo replied mercilessly. “’Bout as warm as the water in the tub after the rest of your family have already taken their baths.”

“Damnations! I’ve unleashed my ability every day for a half year—*a half year*, never tiring, never resting, devoting myself solely to my power—and look at all the good it did me…”

“I’m sorry, ‘devoting yourself to your power’?” said Tomoyo, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “What exactly have you done other than coming up with that ridiculous Malediction and making up names for a bunch of attacks you can’t even pull off?”

That was a real gotcha question, and I decided to ignore it. I quickly broke eye contact, dispelled my ability, and sighed. *Guess my power is as useless as always…or so the* past *me would think! It’s not gonna end there, though—not this time!*

“I hate to say this when you guys are all ready to be done, but this isn’t over yet!” I declared. After all, just the other day, my power had finally achieved a new form! In other words, I had undergone an awakening! Some doors can only be opened by those who dedicate themselves fully to their abilities, and I’d gone and opened mine! I’d reached my power’s next stage!

“The time has come! I shall allow you to bask in the glory of *Dark and Dark…of the End*!”

What happened next must’ve taken less than a second in total.

The moment I said my new power’s name, everyone’s expressions had shifted dramatically. As best as I could tell, Tomoyo had instantly used her power to circle around behind me and pin my arms behind my back. A moment later, Sayumi was in front of me, one hand held up against my chest in just the right place to completely immobilize me. Something to do with my center of gravity, probably.

The other two just jumped to their feet and distanced themselves from me as quickly as possible, evacuating to the far corner of the room. They were now standing on guard, watching me carefully and ready to react to anything that might happen. All four of them looked *incredibly* on-edge.

“Uh, umm…?” I stammered. I had no clue what to make of whatever had just happened.

“I *really* hope you weren’t seriously thinking of using *The End*, Andou.” Tomoyo spoke right into my ear. She was scolding me, no doubt about it, but there was also a subtle hint of nervous tension to her tone.

“O-Of course I wasn’t! I was kidding! Just a little joke, jeez…”

“Some things are okay to joke about. Others are most emphatically *not*,” chided Sayumi, finally removing her hand from my chest. Tomoyo let me go around that point as well, and Hatoko and Chifuyu crept back out from the corner. “You haven’t forgotten what happened last time, have you?”

Sayumi's stare was *really* intense, and I quickly averted my gaze, caving under the pressure. "I know, I know... I'll never use *The End* again, I promise."

The day of my second awakening, the day I unlocked my power's next stage, I had activated it without a moment's hesitation. The consequences were dire. If I had to express the whole incident in a single word, I'd have to go with "horrific." If I were allowed to use two words, I might pick "utterly hellish" or "ultimate suffering," maybe.

I didn't even want to think about it. It was the first time in my life I genuinely thought I was going to die, and it was the first time in my life I genuinely thought I might kill someone. When I consider what might've happened if Sayumi and Chifuyu hadn't been around at the time...it sends a chill down my spine.

"Really, the only thing that your awakening changed was that it made your already useless power somehow even *more* useless than before," said Tomoyo. Which was mean, but also true. I couldn't object.

A thousand damnations... Why does my power still have to be worthless post-awakening? What sort of torture is this?!

"Seriously," she continued, "I don't know if I should call you difficult, or just plain crazy, or what... First, you get a black flame that doesn't burn—the weirdest, most incomprehensible power I could possibly think of—and *then* you get an ability that feels like it's picking a fight with the supernatural battle genre itself..."

"Heh. I really am out of place, no matter where I go... Y'know, every once in a while, I wonder: if it weren't for this power of mine, would I just be another ordinary person, living out some commonplace little life?"

"Ugggh." Tomoyo cringed. "Of *course* you'd do the thing where your chuuni delusions wrap so far around you end up pretending you *want* to be normal."

"If he's reached that stage of behavior, that would imply that he's reached the far end of the chuuni spectrum, wouldn't it?" added Sayumi.

What's "the chuuni spectrum" even supposed to be?

Anyway, with that, we'd tested out everyone's powers. Our superpower checkup had finally reached its end. As such, we went back to our usual daily activity: doing whatever we felt like.

As for what *I* felt like doing, I hadn't actually figured that out yet. I considered reading the light novel I was partway through, or challenging someone to a game of Othello, or maybe thinking up a new special move for *Dark and Dark* (or thinking up a name for one, anyway). I didn't get to carry that thought process to its conclusion, though, before somebody opened the door and stepped into our room.

"Excuse me," said the interloper in a clear, carefully controlled tone of voice. "All five of you are here again, I see? You're as close-knit as ever. If there's one thing this club of yours has to brag about, it's your members' attendance rate."

Our snide, scowling visitor was none other than the president of the student council, Kudou Mirei. Her glare was as sharp as her posture was dignified, and her formal, well-enunciated manner of speaking made her seem incredibly straitlaced. Most importantly, she happened to be like us in that she'd awakened to her own supernatural power.

A few days earlier, Kudou had attempted a raid on our club's room. This will probably make it sound like a lot bigger of a deal than it actually turned out to be, but we ended up battling her, more or less, and winning by an overwhelming margin.

Kudou's power—the power to steal other people's powers—was as terrifying as could be. It was an ability worthy of a final boss, and yet by our powers combined, we had managed to drive her back. Well, I *say* our powers combined, but really, everyone knows I did the bulk of the heavy lifting.

"Oh, Miss Kudou. What brings you here today?" asked Sayumi, who happened to be in both the same grade and the same class as her. Meanwhile, the two second-year girls beside me struck up their own hushed conversation.

"I wonder why Kudou is here again," pondered Hatoko. "Do you have any idea, Tomoyo?"

"No clue. The whole trying-to-get-our-club-shut-down thing was all an act, so who knows why she'd be back."

"Y'know what I think?" I said, cutting into the exchange. "I think she's here for round two! She was so frustrated by her humiliating defeat, she decided to come get payback! This is the beginning of Kudou Mirei's revenge arc!"

"As if! The real world doesn't work like a battle manga."

While we were busy speculating, Sayumi was moving her conversation forward. "Do you have business with the literary club today? If you have a request for us, I'd be happy to assist."

"No, I don't," Kudou bluntly replied.

"In that case...can I assume this has something to do with our powers?"

A subtle tension fell over the room. Kudou, a girl with a superpower, came to see us knowing very well that we had powers too. I think it goes without saying that there had to be some greater significance to her visit. *But what could it be?* I gulped, but my expectations were immediately betrayed.

"No, actually. I don't have anything in particular to report when it comes to our powers. I haven't noticed any new developments lately."

Her reply immediately broke the rising tension, and I felt my muscles slowly unclench. I do have to admit I had mixed feelings about it, though. I was half relieved and half disappointed. Nothing happening was the absolute best case scenario, but at the same time, deep down inside, a small part of me *wanted* some sort of crazy, exciting development to strike.

“I’m here for a purely personal reason,” explained Kudou. “I’m not visiting in my capacity as the president of the student council or as someone with a superpower. No, I’m simply here as myself.” At that point, Kudou’s intense, ever-serious gaze turned to me.

“Andou Jurai. I came here today to speak with *you*.”

“W-With *me*?”

I hadn’t expected her to call me out at all, but I stood up and walked over to her anyway. What on earth does she want? D-Don’t tell me she’s actually here for vengeance?! Is she pissed that I barely did anything in our last battle but took all the credit and gloated in the end anyway?! Does she want to 1v1 me?!

What should I do?! I’m so screwed! I can’t handle a fistfight, no way, no how! Ah, erm, I mean, umm…my power is far too mighty and terrible to ever consider using on a mere civilian! Pulling out a world-ending force of devastation in a basic brawl is just terrible form.

As I trembled with fear, Kudou was still staring straight at me. Her eyes burned with a crazed fervor, and her cheeks looked a little flushed. *Maybe she took the time to warm up before she came here?*

“S-Stop staring at me, Andou,” said Kudou. “Y-You’re embarrassing me.”

“Huh? Ah, right, sorry!”

“G-Good… Ah, no, I-I mean, I didn’t say not to look at me at all!”

“Okaaay?”

The situation was getting awkward, and I had *no* clue why. She wasn’t there to throw down, at least; I was fairly certain of that.

Kudou took a moment to stop, clear her throat, and resolve herself before she spoke up once more. “Andou. I came here today to reply to the letter you gave me.”

“Letter? What letter?”

“Don’t play dumb. I’m talking about the letter you left in my shoe cubby by the entryway.”

“Oooh, *that*! Okay, I see now.”

“You wrote Kudou a letter, Andou?” asked Sayumi, who was still standing next to me.

“Yeah, basically.” I *had* slipped a note into her shoe cubby the day after we kicked her ass in an epic battle. I didn’t know her phone number or anything, so it was the only way I could think of to contact her. I was at a total loss as to what part of that note she felt needed a reply, though… *Oh, wait! I think I see what’s going on here!*

“Andou,” Kudou continued, “you’ve made the depth of your feelings exceptionally clear, and I want you to know that I understand them perfectly.”

“Really? That’s great! Seriously, I’m super happy to hear it.”

“I would have rather had this conversation in private, frankly…but I suppose it doesn’t really matter. I’m sure everyone here would find out before long regardless.”

“Yeah, agreed! You’ve gotta brag to everyone about this sorta stuff, right?”

“B-Brag to them? I…I suppose so…”

At that point, Kudou suddenly fell silent. Her eyes darted hesitantly about the room, and her cheeks were now very clearly flushed.

“A-Andou Jurai!” she shouted, her voice shrill. “I’ve come today to reply to your letter—to your *love* letter, here and now!”

“To…what?” *My* love *letter? What’s she talking about?* I could practically feel the question mark floating above my head, but Kudou ignored my confusion and continued.

“I love you too! Let’s date!”

In that instant, the very air in the club room froze solid. I hadn’t noticed Hatoko use *Over Element: Niflheim Mode Technique: Absolute Zero*, so I had to assume that Kudou’s declaration was the cause of our paralysis. All available evidence would suggest that she’d just asked me out. Told me she loved me, straight up, point-blank.

It took a few seconds for all of our thought processes to resume. There was no end to the exclamations that needed saying and questions that *desperately* needed asking, but for us literary club members, one phrase took precedence above all others.

What the hell kind of plot twist was that?! LMAO!

BLOODY
VIVRE
Guilty Sin Vurai

Any girl who isn't a virgin isn't a girl at all—non-human waifus included.

Sagami Shizumu
Senkou High, second year, class 1
Blood type: O

The sworn enemy of men and women alike—in other words, the enemy of humanity as a collective whole. He really wants people to call him "Sagamin" as a nickname, but nobody has ever taken him up on it.

Sagami and I have a more-than-acquaintances, less-than-friends sort of relationship. Our tastes don't align, but we're on a surprisingly similar wavelength.

There's but one universal truth that the both of us can see eye to eye on: **Darkness is the best.** The thing is, I mean it literally, and he's talking about *To Love Ru*.

Chapter 2: Lover——Robber

When I was a little girl in elementary school—in fourth or fifth grade, I think?—a certain incident sent the whole school into an uproar. The craziest part? *I* was the one behind it!

I was *so* shocked, really. It had all happened so suddenly that I panicked and sprinted off down the hallway, fleeing the scene of the crime. I ended up hiding in the shadows in a little empty space by one of the staircases, all alone, my arms wrapped around my knees.

I should've admitted that it was my fault right away, and I *knew* it, but I was just so scared! I couldn't bring myself to do anything but sit there and cry, not budging an inch. I wished that somebody, *anybody* would come along and save me. Pretty irresponsible, right?

But just then, a voice I knew very well rang out. "*There* you are!" said a boy who I hadn't even noticed arrived. I wiped the tears from my eyes and looked up to find Juu staring down at me, an irritated look on his face.

"Juu…" I whimpered. "How'd you find me?"

"As if I wouldn't, stupid! Figuring out where you'd decide to hide was a piece of cake."

"R-Really?"

"You think you can hide from the power of Pesquisa? Well, think again!" Juu smiled ecstatically as I oohed and aahed with admiration. "But anyway, Hatoko, what were you *thinking*?" he asked, giving me a hard, appraising look.

"I just… I just…" I sniffled. "Yesterday, my mom taught me about something… I noticed that when comedians on TV shout 'Don't push that button, no matter what!' somebody always pushes it anyway. I said I thought that was awful, but mom said that it's fine, 'cause it's 'obligatory'…"

"Yeah, I guess that is pretty much obligatory on those shows. But how does *that* explain anything…?" asked Juu, scratching his head in bewilderment. "You *know* you're not supposed to trip the fire alarm!"

"Ugh…"

I don't know if it was curiosity, or if I felt a sense of obligation, or if in that moment I'd inherited the fearless spirit of a TV performer. Whatever the case, that feeling drove me to push the emergency alarm button in my school's hallway. It had a little glass cover on it that said 'PRESS HERE,' so I did just that. Then the fire alarm started blaring, and the whole school went crazy.

I was dumbfounded, of course. I was still dumbfounded even as I explained what had happened to Juu. "B-But, but…our teacher told us to never, ever push it, no matter what! So I thought, well…"

"Our teacher wasn't acting! She was actually serious about that!" said Juu as he peeked out a nearby window. "Oh, jeez," he muttered, his voice

quavering and his face pale as he looked back at me. “Looks like everyone’s already finished evacuating.”

My regrets were growing by the second. I was starting to realize that with each passing moment, the situation was becoming more and more impossible to come back from. *Oh no... What should I do, what should I do, what should I do?!*

“Man, guess the fire drill we had the other day paid off after all!” Juu muttered to himself. “No wonder the principal gave us all that crap about how it’d taken us more than ten minutes to get out of the building and how if it had been a *real* fire somebody would’ve died for sure. Maybe him making us redo it over and over wasn’t such a bad thing after all.”

“What should I do...?” I whimpered. “What should I do, Juu?”

“What do you want me to say? The only choice is to go down there and apologize, right?”

“Maybe if I jumped out and said ‘Surprise! Gotcha!’ they’d just laugh it off...?”

“Sorry, Hatoko. I know everyone always talks about how coddled our generation is, but not even we could get away with a prank like *that*.”

“Ugggh... I wish our generation was even coddleder...”

“That’s definitely not a real word.”

Is that really my only choice? Do I have to fess up and apologize? But I can’t! I’m scared!

“Sheesh... All right, c’mon, Hatoko. Let’s go,” Juu sighed, rolling his eyes and holding a hand out to me. “If you’re that scared of getting chewed out, I’ll apologize with you.”

“What?! N-No, you don’t have to do that! Nuh-uh, no thank you!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it! I’m used to getting shouted at. Another two or three tongue-lashings on top of it all isn’t gonna make a difference to me at this point.”

“But, still... I’d feel terrible if I told them that you’re the one who pushed it instead of me...”

“Hey, whoa, I didn’t say I’d go *that* far! I’ll apologize *with* you, not sacrifice myself *fo*r you!”

“Should we say that you forced me to push it, then?”

“That’s even worse! You’re gonna make me look like a total bully!”

“Ugggh, Juuuuuu! Take the fall for me, pleeease...”

“Since when did you start acting like some sorta scheming villainess, Hatoko?”

The truth is, I was so incredibly panicked that my mind was racing all over the place. Juu sighed, then held his hand out to me once again.

“Okay, how about this? We’ll tell them that we were playing together, and you pushed it by accident. Sound good?”

“Can we...?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. We’d better hurry, though—if we take much longer, a fire truck might show up!”

I took Juu's hand, and he helped me to my feet. Standing so close to him, I idly noticed that I was a little taller than he was. I knew he might outgrow me someday, but for the moment, at least, I was more grown-up than him…yet somehow, his hand felt so big and so warm, it made me feel tiny in comparison.

"Tee hee hee!"

"What're you giggling about? We're going to apologize; you gotta look like you're sorry!"

"Your hand's kinda warm, Juu!"

"Hmm? Mwa ha ha—of course it is! After all, a dark dragon of blackest fire slumbers within my right arm!"

"Oh, really? That explains it!"

We set off, hand in hand. I knew that I was about to get shouted at in front of the entire school, but for some strange reason, I was as calm and happy as could be.

☆

Kudou Mirei was the president of our school's student council. I'd done some looking into her after the incident a few days beforehand, and I was astonished to find that she was an even more incredible person than I'd given her credit for. Her grades were exemplary, and she excelled athletically, but that wasn't all: she was also widely acknowledged for her strength of character, and the entire student council attested to her incredible leadership ability.

She'd been elected in such an overwhelming landslide the year before that none of the other candidates even came close to her in the final tally. I'd never had any interest in school politics, myself, but as I asked around and heard the tales and rumors of her achievements, I started developing a genuine sense of respect for her. She really did sound sort of amazing.

I'd thought I had her all figured out after her attempted raid on the literary club, but the more I dug into her, the more I realized that my assessment might've been premature. And then, just when I was reevaluating my opinion on her, I suddenly had to deal with *this* crap.

"I love you too! Let's go out!"

"…"

Seriously, what am I even supposed to say about this development? This goes way beyond the realm of your average sudden plot twist! It didn't come from left field, it came from a completely different ballpark! Maybe I should start calling her Kudou the Living Plot Twist—okay, no, I have more important things to think about right now!

"Umm, Kudou? Sorry, I don't think I quite caught that. What?" I hesitantly asked.

"Hmm? What, didn't you hear me? It's a little embarrassing, but I suppose I'll have to say it again, then." She paused to take a long, deep breath. "I love you too! Let's go out!"

She repeated the exact same line as last time, word for word, and my last remaining iota of hope that I'd misheard her withered and died. "W-Wait a second. Give me a minute to think this through… Umm, so, when you say we should g-go out, what *exactly* do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I said. Going out is going out. What else could I possibly be talking about?"

"A-And just to make *absolutely* sure, this isn't one of those ridiculous rom-com setups where the punch line's that you're just asking me to 'go out' shopping with you or something, right?"

"Of course it isn't. Going out means dating, in the romantic sense of the term. Isn't that obvious?" Kudou's tone and expression were completely unflappable, with the sole exception of a slight blush spreading across her cheeks. It was a pretty cute reaction, to be fair, but I had *way* too much on my mind to really register it. My mind was, in fact, blowing a gasket.

"H-Hold up a—I mean, please wait a second!" shouted Tomoyo, jumping in to take my place in the conversation as I blue-screened. She'd rephrased herself halfway through her sentence, presumably since she'd remembered that Kudou was an upperclassman whom she was supposed to show some degree of respect.

Tomoyo walked past me and strode right up to Kudou. "Wh-What on earth is going on all of a sudden?! Did you seriously come here to a-ask this idiot out?! What are you *thinking*?!"

"Hmm. Kanzaki Tomoyo," muttered Kudou, her aura of calm standing in stark contrast to Tomoyo's freakout. "Could it be that you're in love with Andou?"

"*Wh-Whaaat*?!" Tomoyo's face went from mild panic to boiled lobster in the blink of an eye. "N-No, I am *not*! I'd sooner go for a girl than that living, breathing embodiment of cringe, and no, I do *not* swing that way!" *Okay, wow. Ouch.*

"I see. In that case, I don't believe you have any right to involve yourself in this conversation. This is a private matter between me and Andou Jurai, and I'm afraid I have to ask you to step off."

Tomoyo fell silent. It looked like she couldn't think of any way to argue back against Kudou's claim. She spent a second grinding her teeth in frustration, then she spun about and went after me next.

"Wh-Why're you so quiet?! Say something, dammit! Wh-What is she *talking* about?!"

"I really wish I knew, believe me!"

"Kudou said something about a…l-love letter a minute ago. You *didn't*…?"

"No, I didn't, really! I have *no idea* what she meant by that!"

"What are you talking about, Andou?" asked Kudou, cutting back into the conversation. "You left a letter in my shoe cubby that laid out your feelings for me in clear and explicit detail."

“Yes, about that,” said Sayumi. It sort of felt like she’d been waiting for that precise opportunity to speak up. “Andou, Kudou, I believe that neither of you have communicated anywhere near as much as you should have in regard to this ‘love letter.’ Most likely, that would be the cause of all this confusion.”

She picked the situation apart in an instant, analyzed the driving forces behind it, and even started us off on a potential solution. My club president was always reliable in a pinch! Even when everyone else was flipping out, we could always count on her to stay as cool and collected as ever, calmly observing and assessing the situation. If we lived in the world of Dragon Quest, she’d be a mage for sure.

“Andou, did you send a love letter to Miss Kudou?” asked Sayumi.

“No, I didn’t!”

“So he claims. Do you have anything to say about that, Miss Kudou?”

“Why are you lying, Andou? You’re definitely the one who left this letter for me. You admitted it yourself just a moment ago!”

She was right about that. I *did* write her a letter, for sure. And that could only mean one thing.

“Whaaat?! Y-You’re saying you think *that* was a love letter?! No, it wasn’t!”

“*What*?!”

“How on earth could you read *that* and think it was a love letter?!”

“How could you intend it as anything else?!” Kudou reached into her pocket and pulled out an envelope. It was the very same one I’d left for her the other day, no mistaking it. She opened it up and showed us the letter inside.

To Her Ladyship Kudou Mirei,

In our recent skirmish, I bore witness to your power in all its glory. Your potential awed me, and your might pierced my heart. Thusly, I shall hereby bestow upon thee an appellation most sinful of your own:

Grateful Robber

-The Conqueror of Chaos: Guiltia Sin Jurai
(AKA Andou Jurai)

“Andou…you wrote this?” asked Tomoyo as she read the letter. I nodded in affirmation.

“It’s hardly a long letter,” noted Sayumi, “yet it manages to swap between ‘you’ and ‘thee,’ seemingly at random. Only Andou could possibly write something so extra and yet so disappointingly half-baked at the same time.”

It sort of felt like she was trying to put me down with that one. Couldn’t you just say you knew it was me by the handwriting? Hell, I even signed it!

And who else could've written "Grateful Robber" in such flawlessly majestic cursive?!

At that point, Tomoyo sidled over and whispered into my ear. "Hey, Andou? I think I can probably guess, but just for the record, what exactly was that letter supposed to mean?"

"Just that I had a really good idea for her power's name, so I decided to give it one."

"Yep. Figured as much." Tomoyo sighed, pressing a hand to her forehead, then looked over at Kudou. "Hey, Kudou? Out of curiosity, how did *you* interpret that letter?"

"Why do you have to ask? How could this possibly be anything other than a love letter?!" she exclaimed, snatching the sheet of paper back from us. "If you translate all of its obtuse metaphors, you end up with something to the tune of 'I fell for you at first sight. Please go out with me!'"

What an incredibly optimistic interpretation!

"The part about his heart being pierced was particularly well written!" she continued. "That's an absolutely classic, straightforward expression of love."

I was talking about your power to steal powers, actually! It is such a ridiculously awesome, final-boss worthy ability that it pierced my heart, not you!

"Of course, he was too embarrassed to write it all out in terms that straightforward, so he buried his intentions in strange names and archaisms. Really, Andou," she chuckled, "you're *adorable*!"

Oh nooo! She thinks my whole persona was just me being embarrassed! This is the first time I've ever found myself wishing someone would roast me for being a chuuni poser!

"And above all else, there's this part here—the part where he called me his '*Grateful Lover*.' He may have written it in English, but I'm perfectly aware of what it means! I have to admit, seeing you call me something like *that* was genuinely moving!"

"Y-Yeah, that! What the hell was *that* about, Andou?!" shouted Tomoyo. "Your names are always pretty out there, but what possessed you to go with *lover*, of all the words?!"

"I didn't! That's not what it says at all!" I pulled a jet-black notebook, the *Bloody Bible*, out from my bag, flipped it open to a blank page, and rewrote the title to show everyone. "That doesn't say 'lover'! It says *robber*! Look, see?! In other words, her power name is this: '*Grateful Robber*'!"

That's right—I gave her power a name signifying that she was the mightiest marauder, the queen of thieves! It took a lot, and I do mean a *lot* of careful thought and consideration before I came up with that one, and in my book it turned out *sensationally* well!

Tomoyo *almost* looked sold on my explanation for a moment, but it didn't last. "Why the *hell* did you have to write it in cursive?! How were we supposed to tell what it says when the writing's so stupidly overwrought?!

It’s completely illegible, dammit! And who even says ‘robber’ in this day and age?! If you wanted to get across the idea that she stalks people and takes their crap, why not go with ‘hunter’ or ‘thief’ or something?!”

“I get what you’re saying, but for real, there’s a super deep and significant reason why... A-Anyway, the *point* is that we understand how all this started now, so we’ve gotta clear this misunderstanding up right—”

“Wait just a moment,” Sayumi whispered, cutting me off. “Andou, I’d like you to put off resolving the misunderstanding until after we’ve given this situation some further thought.”

“Huh? But why? Wouldn’t everything be easier if we cleared the air right now?”

“Think of it from Kudou’s perspective... Or rather, take a moment to calm down and consider the entire state of affairs on the whole.” Sayumi sounded really serious about her advice, so I decided to take it.

I glanced over at Kudou. My gaze happened to meet hers, but only for a moment; she blushed and glanced away just a second later. Ooof. Yeah, real subtle there... I’m sure a hyper-dense protagonist type would be asking if she has a fever right about now, but unfortunately, I’m not quite that thickheaded.

“O-Oh, right!” said Kudou. “Now that we’re dating, we have to decide what to call each other, don’t we? I think I’d like to call you ‘darling.’ You don’t mind, do you?” she asked, fidgeting and glancing at me with every other word.

Is it just me, or did she start acting like I’ve already said yes somewhere along the way...? Oh, I get it! She thinks I asked her out, so in her mind, me turning her down wouldn’t make the slightest bit of sense!

Yeah...okay, I get it now. This is pretty painful.

Suddenly, I understood exactly what Sayumi was trying to tell me. Watching Kudou act like this was excruciating. Not only had she misunderstood an underclassman’s intentions, she’d *accepted* his nonexistent declaration of love...in *public*. If she were to find out that all of it had been a huge misunderstanding...

“Oh, god,” I whispered. “She might never come back to school again.”

“I’m glad you understand the gravity of the situation,” agreed Sayumi with a solemn nod. That’s right: Sayumi, the girl I sometimes suspected lived to mess with people, was going out of her way to protect Kudou without so much as a sarcastic wink. That, more than anything, proved how serious of a crisis Kudou was in.

“I appreciate that this may not match with the impression you’ve had of her, but Kudou does an exceptional job as the president of the student council,” Sayumi added. “I would go so far as to say that the school couldn’t get by without her. You’re partially responsible for creating this situation, so you have a responsibility to resolve it as well.”

“How am I supposed to—”

“That’s an order, Andou.”

Easy for you to say! I felt bad for her, and I wished I could do something to help, but tragically, I couldn't even begin to think of a solution. It didn't help that off to the side, Kudou was digging herself even deeper into a hole.

"D-Darling? Ha ha, wow, it's actually sort of embarrassing to say that out loud!"

Just listen to her! I can't exactly walk up and say "Whoops, sorry, this was all one big misunderstanding!" at this point!

As I mulled over the problem, seriously worried for once about my lack of a solution, I heard a little voice shout "No!" behind me. It was Chifuyu. She'd been sitting tight so quietly this whole time, I was convinced she'd fallen asleep.

"No, no, no, no, no!" she cried, jumping out from her chair. I was used to her being blank-faced and apathetic pretty much all the time; I didn't think I'd ever seen her freak out like that before.

"You can't take Andou! *No*!" Chifuyu wailed, walking over to Kudou and pounding on the president's midsection with her little fists.

"A-Aren't you Miss Satomi's...?"

"No, no, *no*! You can't have him!"

生徒会長
©029

“Your name is Chifuyu, isn’t it? You don’t understand, I’m not—”

“No means no! *Nooooooooo*!”

“Mngh...”

Kudou had been strong-arming her way through the situation up to that point without letting anyone else get in a word of protest, but it seemed not even she could bring herself to take that sort of attitude against an elementary schooler. The look on her face made it clear that she had no idea how to deal with the girl.

Chifuyu... I never knew you felt that strongly about—

“Andou’s a stupid dumbo, so you can’t take him away! He needs me to play with him, so he has to stay here!”

Huh...? Wait, does Chifuyu think she’s doing me a favor when I play with her? Am I getting patronized by an elementary schooler?

While I was shocked by that sudden revelation, Tomoyo jumped in to take over. “A-Anyway, you should really rethink this, Kudou! Dating *this* Ultimate Edgelord would be a total waste of your youth!”

“Hey, keep your mediocre titles to yourself!” I snapped.

“Okay, then this Storyteller of the Darkest Edge.”

“Ugh! I want to protest, but that’s actually really cool...” Before I knew it, I’d acquired yet another title. This wasn’t the time, though, so I tried to suppress the smoldering excitement in my heart.

Meanwhile, Tomoyo shot me a look. I knew exactly what she was trying to tell me right away. Oh, okay! So that’s the plan we’re going with! If our goal’s to put an end to this situation while minimizing the damage to Kudou herself, we just have to make her hate my guts! If she comes to the conclusion that I’m a pathetic excuse for a man, she’ll forget all about wanting to date me!

“Believe in yourself, Andou!” Tomoyo whispered encouragingly. “All you have to do is act the way you always do, and everything will work out perfectly!”

“Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just be yourself!”

“That line would’ve sounded really nice if you’d said it at *any* time other than right now!” In other words, all I had to do to make a girl hate me was be myself. *Wow. Ouch.*

“Hmm? For a member of my darling’s club, you have a remarkably poor understanding of what makes him so incredibly charming, Kanzaki Tomoyo. You have awfully bad taste in men, don’t you?” replied Kudou, still perfectly composed. Our plan was off to a terrible start, and even worse, she seemed really set on the whole calling me darling thing. “You and your club defeated me the other day, I’ll acknowledge that much. However, in terms of our powers themselves, I have yet to lose! I was and still am confident in my ability—I was confident enough to pick a fight with you, even though I knew I’d be fighting one on five!”

I knew very well that she wasn't being a sore loser or putting on airs. Her power, *Grateful Robber*, could render any ability of ours, no matter how mighty, instantly irrelevant. She could steal them away the second she witnessed their activation, and there was absolutely nothing we could do to stop it. In the realm of superpowers, she was so strong she might as well have been cheating.

"I lost because you had Andou Jurai on your side. That's all there is to it. If my darling hadn't been around, I probably would have defeated all of you. Am I wrong?"

"I...I mean..." Tomoyo mumbled, unable to deny it.

"Frankly, I underestimated him," continued Kudou. "I thought he was nothing more than a useless man with a useless power. And yet, somehow, that very power was my undoing."

Tomoyo was rendered speechless.

"Anyone would think that the power to create a flame that doesn't burn is completely worthless, yet he found a way to masterfully bring out every ounce of its potential. And that's not all. He was also perceptive enough to discern my true identity and see through my pretense of auditing the literary club."

Tomoyo blinked. "Huh?"

"His never-ending tomfoolery, his constant eccentric behavior...every bit of it was a trap laid solely to make me drop my guard. He played me like a fiddle." Kudou paused to let out a little giggle. "When all was said and done, every bit of it was part of my darling's master plan."

"No, I mean, he *said* that, but he was just making—"

"And that's precisely why I fell for him: his exceptional, calculating intellect!"

Kudou laid her feelings right on the table for all to see, and Tomoyo was taken aback. She turned to face me, so slowly I could practically hear her neck joints creaking, and flapped her lips like she was trying desperately to say something but just couldn't spit it out. The situation was clear: when I claimed that everything had gone "just as planned" at the end of our battle, Kudou had taken it completely at face value.

It all makes sense now. Kudou is smart, studious, and also an absolute moron. One of those folks who gets great grades in spite of being a grade A dingbat.

"L-Look, Kudou," said Tomoyo, trying to make a recovery, "you've got the wrong idea here. I mean, you're giving Andou *way* too much credit! I know it *looked* like he saved the day back then, but really, the whole thing was just one huge coincidence!"

"Excuse me? That's absurd. Isn't it, darling?"

"Mwa ha ha! But of course! It should be obvious by now that every aspect of our encounter was carefully scripted by none other than *me*! This world is but a stage for marionettes, and I pull the puppet strings!"

"See?"

“What the *hell*, Andou?!”

Gah, crap! I reflexively jumped aboard the praise-train!

Tomoyo glared daggers at me for a moment, then she suddenly looked like she’d remembered something and spun around. “What about you, Hatoko?!” she shouted. “Don’t you have anything to say to these two dumbasses?! I could use a little help over here!”

“Bweh?” Hatoko grunted, caught off guard by Tomoyo suddenly singling her out. “I was just thinking that since the president came over to chat, I should make some tea for everyone…”

She was, in fact, standing by our tea set with a container of leaves in one hand and a little wooden scoop in the other, piling tea into our pot. The one slight problem with the picture was that said pot was already so full of tea leaves, it was literally overflowing. In fact, the pot itself was practically buried in green tea at that point, and Hatoko was still adding scoop after scoop to the mountain.

“Hey, what’re you doing?!” I shouted, rushing over to grab the scoop. “Stop! It’s already full!”

“Juu…? Ah, you’re right! It’s overflowing! How’d *that* happen?!”

“You tell me! You’re the one who did it!”

“O-Oh, am I…? Ah ha ha, wow! I’m such a space case!”

“That’s one way of putting it…” This is weird. Hatoko always looks sort of spacey, sure, but she’s actually really put together when all’s said and done. She basically never acts klutzy like this! What’s gotten into her?

While I was pondering that mystery, Kudou and Tomoyo had started straight-up arguing behind me.

“Did I mishear you, Kanzaki Tomoyo, or did you just call me and my darling ‘dumbasses’?”

“Y’know what? Yeah, I did, because it’s true!”

“Oh? You have a lot of nerve. You can say what you want about me, but I hope you don’t expect me to overlook it if you ridicule my darling.”

“Ughhh…” Tomoyo groaned. “I’m too tired for this. Have it your way. I don’t even care anymore.”

“Hmph! *You’re* the one who decided to pick a fight with *me* in the first place, for whatever reason,” retorted Kudou. “What, do you immediately assume that anyone with a larger chest than yours is your enemy?”

Tomoyo gasped. She had finally run out of steam, but Kudou just happened to pick the perfect closing jab to set her off all over again.

Kudou wasn’t done yet, though. “If that’s the case, then all I can say is that you’re astonishingly petty. I suppose your mind is as narrow as your bosom is lacking.”

“What…? You… *Excuse* me…?”

“The smallest out of all your club’s members, as far as I can tell. Except the elementary schooler, of course…*barely*.”

“B-B-Barely?!”

“Miss Satomi is her aunt, though, and considering her figure, I assume it won’t be long before Chifuyu leaves you in the dust.”

Tomoyo fell silent, but I could tell that she was quivering with rage. It was like watching a volcano shudder moments before it was due to erupt.

“I can’t say I understand how it feels to be so poorly endowed, but, well, try not to fixate on it. A woman’s worth more than her chest alone! Don’t let it get to you.”

Kudou’s seemingly genuine attempt to console Tomoyo dealt the finishing blow. Her cheeks spasmed as she cleared her throat, then she spoke with all the gravitas of a demon lord addressing their next victim.

“Let you be trapped betwixt the hands of time and wander forever the realm of eternity.”

Her catchphrase?! Now?! Oh crap, Tomoyo’s seriously snapped this time! She’s gone off the deep end!

The girl who reigned over time crouched down, ready to unleash her ability. But then…

“Hah! Too easy.”

Tomoyo collapsed on the spot. Kudou was ready for her and had no intention of letting her use her power.

As Tomoyo processed what had just happened, her expression shifted first to astonishment, then to one of profound regret. *Grateful Robber*, the power to steal other people’s powers, had only one condition that limited its potential: to use it, Kudou had to first witness the power she wanted to steal be activated.

“That was careless of you, Kanzaki Tomoyo,” said Kudou with a triumphant grin. “And now, your power to stop time is mine!”

“Ugh…” Tomoyo clenched her teeth with frustration.

Seriously, Kudou, that’s just cheating. And not even the fun sort of cheating! It’s just mean spirited!

“G-Give it back! *Closed Clock* is mine!” Tomoyo wailed.

“You can’t possibly believe it’ll be *that* easy. I’m neither kindhearted nor foolish enough to offer mercy to a woman who just tried to throw the first blow!”

“Umm…Kudou?” I said, stepping into the exchange in spite of myself. I felt way too sorry for Tomoyo to not do *something*. “Sorry, but could you please give Tomoyo her power back? *Closed Clock* really does belong with her. It just doesn’t feel right for anyone else to have it.”

Kudou turned to face me and replied with the most lovely, beaming smile I’d ever seen from her. “Okay! Whatever you say, darling!”

She actually went for it! Since when was she this nice and cooperative?! Is it just with me?!

Kudou touched Tomoyo on the shoulder and silently mouthed something that I couldn’t quite make out. Apparently, touching the person she stole a power from was necessary for her to give it back. “You should be thankful my darling is such a generous person,” she chided.

Tomoyo didn’t say anything in response. She didn’t do anything either. She sorta just stood there, stock still. I was starting to feel really bad for the poor girl. She’d had one of her insecurities mocked, been goaded into launching an all-out attack—catchphrase and all—then got her power stolen. Finally, after all that, she’d had her power returned to her as an act of pity on her enemy’s part. I could hardly even bear to watch.

And, as expected, Tomoyo had had it. “Uh… Ugh… *Ugaaahhhhhh*!” she bellowed in what sounded sort of like a cry of rage and sort of like a shriek of agony before jumping at Kudou, flailing her arms wildly. She didn’t use her power this time, of course.

“Ow! Hey, stop that!” shouted Kudou, quickly countering with her own series of perfectly ordinary punches.

After that, the two of them descended into the most utterly mundane battle imaginable. It wasn’t a supernatural battle by any standard—more of a plain old fistfight. If I had to express the scene in sound effects, it was a “Bap! Pow! Thwack!” sort of affair. A catfight, and a remarkably low-level one at that. I sighed deeply and sank into my chair. Just thinking about the mess I was in was starting to give me a headache.

Around the time that Tomoyo nailed Kudou with a punch right in her eye, their battle seemed to finally be drawing to a close.

“Ow!” yelled Kudou. “H-Hey! Going for the eyes is foul play!”

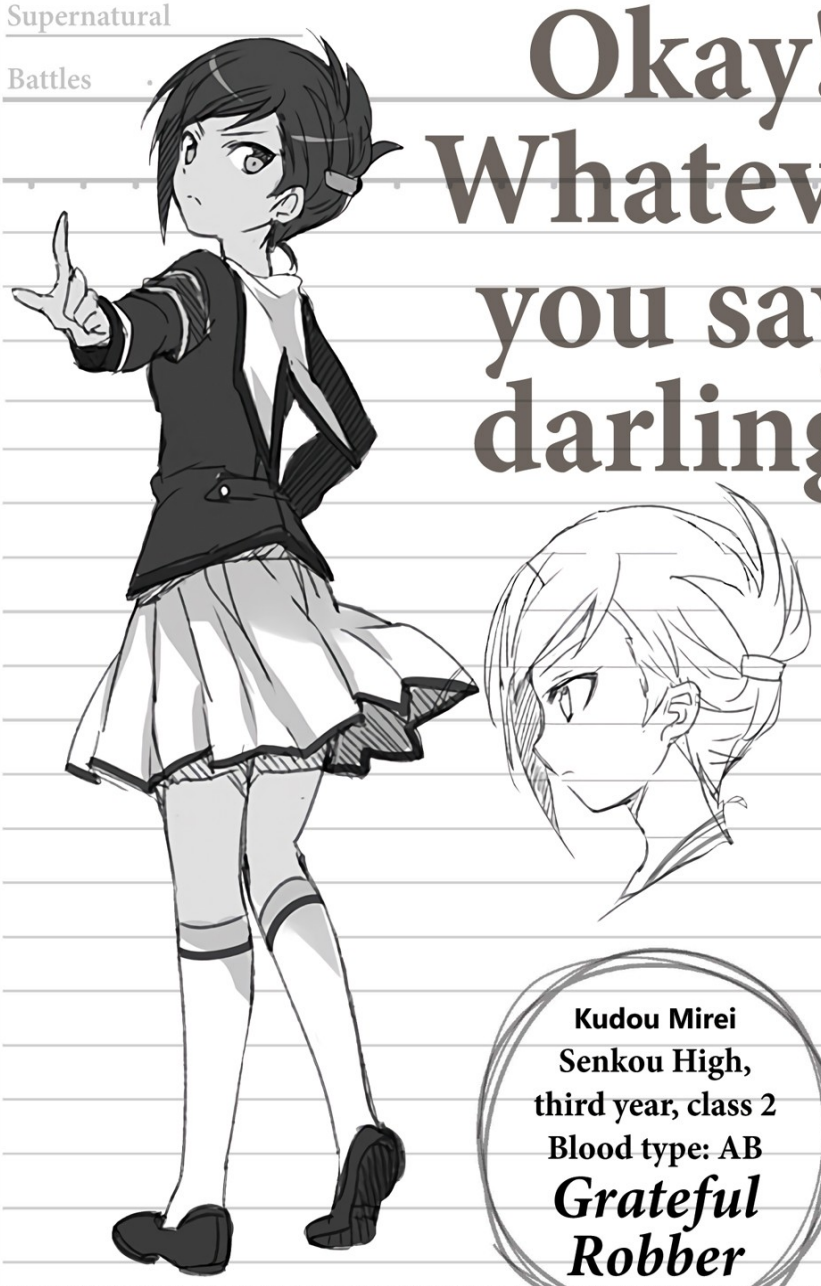
“Ah, s-sorry!”

“No, it’s fine. As long as you didn’t do it on purpose…”

Yep. That’s gotta be the most mundane resolution for all this imaginable.

Supernatural Battles

Okay! Whatever you say, darling!



Kudou Mirei
Senkou High, third year, class 2
Blood type: AB
Grateful Robber

Hers is the power to usurp the powers of others. A single glimpse of somebody's power is all she needs to steal it away from them. It'd be OP enough if she just copied their abilities, but straight-up stealing them seriously feels like cheating. However, not even she could steal the abilities of the members of the Generation of Miracles. She's not Haizaki Shogo!

All that being said, we haven't had enough contact with Kudou thus far to know many specifics about her. **Currently, we're operating under the theory that the over-the-top nature of her power carries a proportional degree of risk along with it.** It's entirely possible that her power has limitations even she may not be aware of...

Excerpt from the Bloody Vivre

CHARACTER FILE 07

Chapter 3: Crisis——Climax

“Hmm. Interesting.”

The next day, I explained the whole ordeal I’d been thrust into to Sagami during our lunch break. He replied with a grunt that told me he was very much *not* interested, though he still had the same nonchalant smile plastered across his face as ever. We’d pushed our desks together for the break, so I didn’t really have anywhere else I could look.

“So, what’s your take on all this?” I asked.

“Hmm…” He thought about it for a moment. “Personally, I’d say that Hatoko’s tits are pretty much the perfect size.”

“Nobody asked!” And quit leering at my childhood friend, you creep!

“I have to admit, though, Sayumi *does* have one hell of a body too. Oh, and I’m not about to discount flat chests either! Little girls like Chifuyu are better when they’re flat, in my book.”

“Seriously, nobody wants to hear about your fetishes!” *Aaargh, I can’t* stand *this guy!* The demeaning, overfamiliar way he talked about girls—and, even worse, *little* girls—made me very literally sick to my stomach. The fact that he barely knew any of my clubmates just made it worse.

“Huh? We weren’t talking about tits?”

“No, we weren’t! And if anyone was listening to you just now, they’re gonna think I’ve been talking about them this whole time! Stop it!”

“Well, if tits aren’t the topic, then this conversation’s outside my jurisdiction.”

“Your jurisdiction’s limited exclusively to boobs?!”

“Weird, though… I could’ve sworn you said that Mirei teased Tomoyo about her tiny titties and Tomoyo blew a gasket, right?”

“I did, yeah, but that wasn’t the *point* of the story at all.”

“Hmm. That’s the only part I can actually remember.”

“Your memory *sucks*!”

“Okay, that’s enough joking around for now,” said Sagami with a mischievous grin. “I *was* actually listening. Mirei, the student council president, ended up falling for you thanks to a wacky misunderstanding, and she asked you out on top of it, right?”

I’d been so lost for a viable solution for the Kudou problem, I’d actually gone to Sagami, of all people, for advice. Yeah, grasping at straws, I know. He wasn’t aware of our powers, so I had to skim over a ton of the details, but it seemed that he’d more or less grasped the important points, at least.

“Right. So, what do you think? What would you do if you were in this situation?”

“Date her, I guess. Why not?”

“You make it sound so simple…” And he was totally brushing me off, to boot.

Though, actually, he was probably just being honest. If he really *were* in my situation, that's probably exactly what he'd do. Sagami Shizumu was an utter degenerate with a pathological inability to judge girls on any basis other than whether or not they trigger his moé senses. He was a womanizer who never treated women well under any circumstances, and the *real* question was whether a guy like him was worth keeping around at all.

"You're a surprisingly conscientious dude, aren't you, Andou?" said Sagami, a look of bemused confusion on his face. "I bet you think that dating a girl you're not actually into would be dishonest or something, right?"

"Yeah, because unlike you, *I'm* not shallow enough to go out with literally anyone who asks."

"Hey, that's just my personal policy. I never reject anyone who comes to me, and I never chase after anyone who leaves."

I sighed. Sagami's flippancy was just plain exhausting sometimes.

"Look, it's not that I'm trying to be *conscientious* or whatever," I explained. "I'm as happy about a girl asking me out as the next guy, and I don't think it's ethically wrong to date a girl you're not already in love with. *That said*, Kudou only asked me out because of a huge misunderstanding. She might think she's got a thing for me, but that feeling's totally baseless. If I jumped into dating her like this, it'd feel like I'm, I dunno…taking advantage of her, I guess? I don't really know how to put it, but you get what I mean."

"I get that you're a real conscientious dude, no question about it," Sagami reiterated with a slight smirk. "But there's one really important factor you're not considering."

"What's that?"

"There's something you have to make sure of before you decide whether or not you wanna date Mirei."

"That being…?"

Sagami actually looked serious for once—maybe for the first time ever. There was an intensity to his gaze that made me gulp reflexively.

"Before anything else," he began, "you have to check if she's a virgin or not."

"You went into serious mode for *that*?! What is *wrong* with you?!"

"Huh…? What're you talking about, Andou?"

"Why would that reaction surprise you?! How was that anything other than horrifying?!"

"But whether or not a girl's a virgin plays an enormous factor in determining her value, doesn't it? Nobody wants to waste their time on used goods."

"Get down on your knees and apologize to all the nonvirgin women around the world!"

"Any girl who isn't a virgin isn't a girl at all—nonhuman waifus included."

This virginity-worshipping son of a bitch, I swear to god! How the hell can he justify mixing up reality and fiction that casually?! As a fellow man—scratch that, as a fellow human, I'm embarrassed to be associated with him! Perhaps he'd be willing to drop dead for the sake of mankind's collective dignity?

"Wait a sec, Sagami—you've dated *how* many girls, again? You can't expect me to believe that *none* of them had any experience! It's not like you can just ask if they're virgins before you agree to date them, right?"

"Actually, that's exactly what I do."

"Holy crap, you seriously do?! But, wait…do they, like, actually *answer*?"

"Yup. I mean, most of them don't want to at first, but when I say I won't go out with them if they don't, they usually give in."

"You're starting to scare me, man…" Sagami was a smoking hot girl magnet, yet in spite of that, as long as I'd known him, he'd never joined the ranks of the normies. I was starting to feel like I'd solved a major piece of that puzzle.

While I was busy internally recoiling in horror, Sagami got an oddly far-off look in his eyes. "Once," he said in a listless drone, "I ended up going out with a secondhand girl who lied about having her virginity. That was a mistake I'll never live down till the day I die."

"Funny—I'm pretty sure that's exactly what she'd say about asking you out."

"Seriously, finding out that a girl I thought was clean isn't actually a virgin is a surprise I could do without. I straight up whited out."

"What are you, a second-generation *Pokémon* protagonist?"

"Oh, speaking of whiting out, there was this *super* mediocre bukkake scene in the eroge I was playing last night. The devs just don't get it: you can't *just* show the money shot, you need to draw the part where she's all covered in spunk too!"

"'Whiting out' is *not* a valid segue for 'spunk!' I know people say that even dirty comments can sound charming if the person saying them is hot enough, but *your* comments sail right past that line and just keep on going!"

Arggh, I can't take much more of this! This is exactly why I can't stand talking to Sagami. He forces me to spend so much time picking apart his stupidity that it becomes my defining character trait! We were supposed to be talking about my problem, but at some point along the way, this ended up being the Sagami Comedy Hour!

"You're a real bundle of energy, you know that, Andou? That's one of the things I like about you. Watching you is always a blast." Sagami chuckled quietly and flashed another of his trademark smiles. If I were a girl, I might've fallen for him on the spot, but speaking as a guy, it just pissed me off.

In any case, I knew that I'd have to bring the whole Kudou affair to a proper conclusion, one way or another. My lack of plan aside, however,

there was another big problem standing in my way: she was the president of the student council, and by extension, the representative of every student at our school.

That meant she was *really* busy pretty much all the time. I knew it wasn't going to be easy to find a good opportunity to sit down and talk with her. As such, there was no point in trying to rush things. I could take my time and carefully think over how to—*wait she's heeere?!*

Well, so much for that thought process! The moment I stepped out of my classroom after school, I practically ran right into her. I didn't even have to search for her—actually, she must've been waiting there for *me*.

I was painfully aware of the stares of the other students that passed us by. They were looking at us like we were some sort of show, and they were making faces that screamed "Wait, what's the student council president doing here?" The girl responsible for their curiosity, however, was utterly unmoved by their attention, and she smiled as she struck up a conversation with me.

"Are you on your way to your club now, darling?" she asked.

"Y-Yeah, sure am," I hesitantly replied.

"I see... I was thinking that maybe we could walk home together, but unfortunately, my student council work has me far too busy this afternoon. I barely got anything done yesterday, so I have to make up for it now!"

"That's rough. Anyway, I'd better head out—"

"So I thought we could walk to the literary club's room together instead! I'll escort you to your club on my way to the student council room. Sound good, darling?"

"How is that even remotely 'on your way'?!" The literary club's room was on the first floor, and the student council's room was all the way up on the top floor. She'd be going *way* out of her way if she actually walked me over there.

"I just want to spend a little time with you today, at least. You don't mind, do you...?" she asked, a slight blush on her face and her head cocked to the side.

Gaaah, why does she have to be so cute?! How am I supposed to turn her down like this?! The answer, of course, was that I couldn't. I had no choice but to reluctantly accept her offer and walk to my club with her at my side. She was humming happily the entire way, practically skipping too.

In short, Kudou was obviously in a fantastic mood. My first impression of her was that she was coolheaded and straitlaced to a fault, but that sure didn't last long. Her personality had gone *completely* off the rails. I had a feeling that she wasn't going to have very much luck with romance in the long run. Her professional life would be spotless, but her private life would be in shambles.

"Oh, that's right! You should give me your email address, darling!" exclaimed Kudou, spinning around to face me. "I meant to ask you for it yesterday, but with all those interruptions, it slipped my mind."

Oh, right. I guess we don't have each other's contact info, now that she mentions it. I didn't have any reason to turn her down, so I pulled out my cell phone and exchanged addresses with her using our phones' infrared sensors. Her phone was an extremely simple, basic model, with no straps or decorations on it at all. *Yeah, that's just like her.*

"Oh? So this is your address?" said Kudou as the transmission completed and my email popped up on her screen.

[bloodydarkness_inthe_apocalypse666@***.ne.jp]

Heh! Now that's *an email address, if I do say so myself.* At the time I came up with it, *Bloody Darkness* was far and away my favorite of my personal titles. As such, I wrote it out in English to make my email address's first half, and for the *second* half...

"I recognize the first two words. That's 'bloody darkness' in English, right?" asked Kudou. "I'm not sure about the ending, though..."

"That," I proudly elucidated, "is how you write 'apocalypse' in English!" Indeed, the apocalypse! Also known as the Book of Revelations, which is, of course, umm...err...a Christian something or other.

"Oh? And why did you pick '666' for the ending? That can't possibly be your birthday."

"Ah, yes, 666. In the Book of Revelations, that number...is the Number of the Beast." Indeed, the Number of the Beast! Which would be... Okay, I'll be real here, I have no clue what it actually is, but it's called the Number of the Beast, and that's good enough for me! The long story short of it's that the word apocalypse and the number 666 work exceptionally well together...probably.

God damn, my email address is hella cool.

"Hmm. So, what does it all mean, in the end?" asked Kudou.

"That...is a truth best left unspoken. I've no desire to drag you into my tainted destiny."

"Is that so? Well, I don't mind if you don't want to explain it. Nobody likes an excessively nosy woman, after all," Kudou said, brushing off the matter of my email address like it was nothing.

Aww, c'mon, that's the part where you're supposed to beg me to explain it! I had so much more exposition I wanted to deliver about that address!

"More importantly...wh-what do you think of my address?" she asked, her voice slightly shrill. I glanced down at my own phone and took a look at her email address.

[mirei_jurai_foreverlove@***.ne.jp]

Umm.

Mirei, Jurai, forever love. Huh. Yeah, don't really have to ask what that means.

Oh boy.

Oooh boy.

Oooooh god, whyyyyyyyyy…

This is not a good sign. This is, in fact, the absolute worst sign I could ask for.

Kudou giggled. “I was thinking about you so much last night that I couldn’t manage to fall asleep,” she bashfully explained. “So, well, I just couldn’t help myself!”

Yeah, I can tell. Which is a shame, considering you desperately need help right now. Preferably professional help.

She’d made a fatal error that was all too common for people in the honeymoon phase of a relationship. A youthful indiscretion that she was absolutely guaranteed to regret, no matter *how* the situation was resolved in the end. The definition of awkward excess. When people turned the sappy couple crap up to eleven like that, it was always a sure sign that the relationship would be over within a week, and yet another email change would soon follow.

“Umm, darling…?” Kudou said as I stood there in stunned silence. “Ah, I see! You’re so happy you’ve been rendered speechless!”

Just how hopelessly optimistic is this girl? It’s true what they say: there really is no stopping a maiden in love! I’m so screwed—she’s even more excited about this whole dating thing than I thought!

The fact that she’d changed her address to that masterpiece of cringey horror meant without a doubt that she’d already told all her friends about our “relationship.” I was more convinced than ever that I had to resolve her misunderstanding as soon as possible…but I just couldn’t bring myself to go through with it. She just looked so *happy*, giggling uncontrollably as she stared at her stupidly sappy email address. *How could I possibly tell her it was all a lie?*

“Well, here we are! Have fun in your club today, darling!”

“Yeah, will do… Good luck with your student council stuff.”

“Oh, and I know the literary club’s full of cute girls, but don’t even think about cheating on me!”

“Uhh…right.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow! I’ll email you later tonight!”

Kudou departed, leaving me alone by the literary club room’s door. It took her a while, on account of her turning around every three steps to wave goodbye, but she finally turned a corner. I sighed wearily, then walked into our room.

“Man, this is such a disaster,” I muttered to myself. “Seriously, what am I supposed to do about—huh?”

The moment I stepped inside, I realized that something was wrong. Tomoyo, Hatoko, Sayumi, and Chifuyu had all turned to give me the coldest, unfriendliest looks I’d ever seen from them. Their glares were so pointed, I could literally feel them digging into my skin.

“Wh-What…? What’s wrong, guys…?” I nervously asked.

“Nothing,” all four of them replied in unison, immediately breaking eye contact. Every one of them was very obviously upset, though I couldn’t even begin to guess what they were mad about. The club room was usually a cozy, relaxing sanctuary for me, but suddenly it felt like I’d stepped right into enemy territory.

“H-Hey, Tomoyo, did something happen?” I asked as I took a seat.

“‘Did something happen,’ he says,” she parroted, still making no effort to conceal her irritation. “How ’bout you try asking yourself that?”

I decided to take her up on that and directed my attention inward, focusing on my deepest subconscious. “I know you can hear me, O inner self of mine. Answer me, please… Just who the hell am I?!”

“Who said anything about talking to your inner self?! That is *not* what I meant!”

“Huh? Wait, was I misunderstanding something?”

“Yeah—how to act like a sane human being! Not that that’s anything new,” Tomoyo jabbed, shaking her head in exasperation. Then she glanced away, nervously brushing a hand through her hair as she quietly continued. “Th-That was Kudou with you just now, wasn’t it? It’s really irritating to see the two of you flirting in public, you know?”

“Huh? She just walked with me to the room, that’s all. And it was her idea to begin with… And wait, we were *not* flirting!”

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that! Admit it: you’re not actually as unhappy about all this as you want us to believe, are you? I mean, just look at Kudou—she’s pretty, and she has a great figure to boot,” muttered Tomoyo, still refusing to make eye contact.

“Okay, seriously, what’s going on? Why’re you being so pissy today?”

“I’m not being pissy!”

“What, are you jealous or something?”

“A-Am I *what*?!” shouted Tomoyo. A blush flashed across her face, and she stiffened up so suddenly, she practically jumped out of her chair. “Wh-Wh-Why the hell would I be jealous of Kudou?! *I* don’t wanna d-date you at all!”

“Huh? No, I didn’t mean of Kudou specifically! I just meant, like, of couples in general. Single people always get jealous of people in relationships, right?” *When you see a happy couple flirting in public, the first thing you do is curse them internally. That’s just basic human instinct.*

“Oh, is *that* what you meant?” she sighed.

“Well, yeah,” I replied. “What did you *think* I meant?”

Tomoyo let out a frustrated moan and shouted, “Wh-Who cares?!” before making a point of very forcefully breaking eye contact again. She was, as always, an incredibly hard person to figure out.

Around that point, I happened to look over into the corner of the club room, where Hatoko was brewing a pot of tea. “Hey, Hatoko. Think you could pour me a cup too?”

“Ignooore.”

“Uh...” She sure did just say ‘ignore’ out loud. Okay. Huh. “H-Hey?”

“Ignooore.”

“Okay, what’s up with this ‘ignore’ thing? What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“I, Kushikawa Hatoko, am currently ignoring Juu,” she said with a frown. Frankly, that just made me more confused than ever. “Please don’t talk to me while I’m giving you the silent treatment!”

Oh, come on. What sort of moron tells the person they’re mad at that they’re getting the silent treatment? Hatoko had always been innocently good-natured, and it was once again clear that she just wasn’t suited for this sort of thing. Girl didn’t have a malicious bone in her body.

“Okay, but Hatoko—”

“Silent treatment! Please don’t talk to me!”

“But if I don’t try to talk to you, then you *can’t* give me the silent treatment, can you?”

“Wait, huh? What do you mean?” asked Hatoko, instantly reverting to her usual attitude.

Thank goodness she’s so predictable. “The silent treatment’s only the silent treatment if the person you’re giving it to tries to talk to you! How would they even know you’re ignoring them otherwise? In short, if you wanna give me the silent treatment, I have to try to talk to you first!”

“O-Okay, I see. Umm, but in that case, what should I do? How do I give you the silent treatment properly?”

“Why would you ask *me* that? Think it through yourself!”

“Right! Okay. I’ll think about it!”

That conversation could only have gotten dumber from that point on, so I decided to drop it and move along. I figured I’d go check up on Chifuyu next. I found her with a frown on her face and her cheeks puffed out sulkily. She was hugging her favorite stuffed squirrel, Squirrely.

“I guess you’re in a bad mood too, huh, Chifuyu?” I asked, trying my best to sound casual.

Chifuyu held Squirrely up to her face. “Chifuyu ain’t talkin’ to you today, pal! Shove off!” it snapped.

I mean, *Squirrely* didn’t really say that, of course! The stuffed animal couldn’t talk, and the voice was obviously Chifuyu’s. I could tell she was trying her best to change it, but it wasn’t really working out super well. *I guess she’s trying to do a ventriloquist thing?*

“So, yeah,” said Chifuyu by way of Squirrely, “you wanna talk to Chifuyu today, yer gonna have to do it through me!”

Oh, jeez, she’s so bad at this... I can see her lips moving, and I’m not even trying to catch her in the act. Even worse, she’s trying super hard to keep her mouth from moving, and her chin’s bobbing all over the place as a result. It looks like her jaw is misaligned or something! I didn’t think there was anything Chifuyu couldn’t make look cute, but a jutting jaw definitely crosses a line.

“Uhh, Ch-Chifuyu?”

“You deaf or something, pal? I told ya, if you wanna talk to Chifuyu, yer gonna have to do it through me! Them’s the breaks!”

She shoved the plushie in my face, which was actually sorta freaky. I didn’t let it stop me from pressing on with my questions, though.

“So, err, what’s with the accent?”

“Say what now? You gotta problem with how I talk? Gimme a break, pal! I ain’t got time for yer complaints!”

I didn’t know what to say to that. As best as I could tell, she was aiming to sound like some kind of gangster. I’d known Chifuyu for quite a while at that point, and she’d been carrying Squirrely around for as long as I’d known her, but I’d never had a clue that her squirrel was involved in organized crime. On the other hand, I could sorta understand why she’d make that call. After all, who *doesn’t* feel like busting someone’s kneecaps every once in a while?

“Gettin’ a real good eyeful, ain’tcha, pal? Come any closer and we’ll have ourselves a real dustup, you hear?!”

Oh, now her accent’s hurtling back through time. I think I’ve seen a guy in a fedora say that in a movie before.

“And just fer yer information, pal, Chifuyu’s all sortsa miffed at you!”

“Huh? She is? Why?”

“’Cause you’ve been gettin’ all chummy with that Kudou broad! Flirtin’ and leerin’ like nobody’s business!”

“*That* again…? How many times do I have to say that that’s not what I was trying to do?”

“Oh, and you’d *better* not be thinkin’ that you can pull a fast one on Chifuyu just ’cause she’s a kid!” shouted Squirrely, kicking up the intensity of its tone by a good twenty percent or so. Chifuyu’s jaw, meanwhile, jutted out about twenty percent more than it already was. Somehow, the sheer silliness of the whole situation was starting to make me want to play a little prank on her.

“’Sides, do you even *realize* what it means for a guy and a gal to—”

I plucked Squirrely from Chifuyu’s hands halfway through her line.

“—go…out…? Ah, ah, awaaah!” Chifuyu was left stammering in confusion. She clearly had no idea what she was supposed to do next. “G-Give it back! Andooou, give Squirrely back!”

I passed it back to her.

“Phew… Oh, no you *didn’t*, pal! That’s it, yer *done*! I’mma split yer skull like an acorn, ya cheeky little—”

I snagged it again…

“—punk… Ahh! Uggh, Andooou, give Squirrely—”

…and gave it back, only to snatch it away again a split second later!

“—back… Oh, give it a rest, pal! Now I say, just you wait, I’ll knock yer block into next Tuesday, I say!”

Ooh, I know this one! It sounds like a certain cartoon chicken. Maybe Chifuyu's a fan of that old stuff. But anyway, better call her out now.

"Chifuyu! You've got it backwards!" Squirrely was still firmly in my hands, meaning that Chifuyu was currently attempting a ventriloquist act sans ventriloquist dummy, while putting on a dubious accent and accidentally sticking her jaw out super far, no less.

She paused for a moment as the situation sank in, then let out a pathetic little whimper of shock. I could never figure out what was going through that kid's head, but in that moment, at least, I could guess that doing a phony accent without her plushie to shield her was absolutely mortifying. Her cheeks were rapidly turning red, so I decided to give Squirrely back without making much more of a fuss about it.

The second her plushie was back in her arms, Chifuyu went running over to Hatoko. "Hatokooo! Andou's bullying me!" she sobbed.

"Okay then, Chifuyu!" replied Hatoko. "We can give Juu the silent treatment together!"

"Yeah. I'm gonna ignore him."

"That's the spirit! Why, as far as I'm concerned, Juu's not even in the room!"

The two of them actually seemed to be enjoying themselves at that point, and I had a feeling that I had nothing to gain from watching them any longer. I decided to check in on Sayumi instead. She was sitting by a desk, reading a book, and somehow came across as even more unapproachable than usual. It was like she was emitting some sort of forbidding aura.

"Hey, Sayu—"

"Perish."

"But why, though?!"

"Oh, excuse me. I misspoke. Good day to you, Andou."

"Nope! No way, you do *not* get to brush that one off as an accident! What sort of greeting could you *possibly* mix up with 'perish'?!" *Like, holy crap! That's even more intense than telling me to drop dead!*

Sayumi looked up at me and gasped, her eyes widening. "Andou Jurai? But how? I was so sure that, in that last battle…we would've all been better off if you'd died."

"Playing it up like a dead teammate had come back to life only to end the thought by saying you wish I *had* died?! Not cool!"

"Explain it to me, Andou—why *are* you alive?"

"Abrupt much?! Look, Sayumi, I know you've got upperclassman authority backing you up, but that doesn't mean you can say *anything* and get away with it!"

"I suppose you're right. That was somewhat out of line. Allow me to rephrase myself." Sayumi cleared her throat, then started over. "Explain it to me, Andou—why do you even exist?"

"Now we're questioning my *existence*?! That's even worse than what you said the first time!"

When you really think about it, the precise difference between somebody's life and somebody's existence is actually pretty hard to pin down, but speaking personally, I'd say that "existence" bears a lot more weight...and is a *lot* more cool. Like, a technique that kills your opponent is way less cool than a technique that erases your opponent's very existence! And on the flip side, a forbidden or taboo technique that shaves away the user's life doesn't drive in the ephemeral nature of life itself nearly as much as one that makes the user's very existence vanish like dust in the wind!

But, of course, all that stuff's beside the point.

"This isn't like you, Sayumi. You *never* go for the easy, straightforward options when you're verbally abusing someone! No, this isn't like you at all," I declared, dropping into a thoughtful, serious tone. "You always take the roundabout route, slowly and carefully tightening the noose around your mark's sense of self-esteem, bleeding them dry with carefully cutting remarks until there's nothing left of them but an empty, traumatized husk!"

"I'll take that as a complement," Sayumi replied with a tense, forced smile after a moment of hesitation. That smile faded away in an instant, though. "Frankly, I just felt the sudden urge to pick on you. It's a natural reaction when you see a couple get all over each other in public like that," she explained with a sigh.

"That wasn't my fault! Kudou—"

"Yes, I'm aware. I'm quite certain everyone else is too, for that matter. However, that doesn't make it any easier to swallow."

I fell silent, and a moment later, Sayumi continued. "You need to do something about this situation, and fast." Her gaze dropped to the floor. She hesitated, but she finally managed to spit out one final thought. "I received a message from Kudou last night about her new email address."

"Oooh..." Okay, that would explain it. If she knows about that address, then it's no wonder she looks so put off. I had a feeling that I was probably making a similar expression.

"I never imagined that she would be the type to go so thoroughly overboard when it comes to romance," Sayumi sighed.

"Yeah, hard same."

"Or perhaps I'm looking at this from the wrong perspective. Perhaps it's not a matter of her personality, but rather of *you* being just that charming?" She just barely failed to suppress a sarcastic snicker.

"Please stop teasing me like that." I glanced away and scratched my head awkwardly. "Anyway, I'm surprised. It feels like you know Kudou a lot better than I thought you did." I'd been under the impression that the two of them weren't on great terms at all, but it felt like Sayumi had been nothing but understanding and full of concern for Kudou ever since the incident had started.

"I wouldn't say I know her all *that* well," replied Sayumi with a smile I couldn't quite get a read on. "I think the best comparison might be that my relationship with her is like your relationship with Sagami."

“More than acquaintances, less than friends?”

“More that we don’t see eye to eye on most matters, but we accept and acknowledge each other nonetheless. I would call that a form of friendship, personally.”

Fair, but that makes it sound a hell of a lot cooler than whatever Sagami and I have going on.

“Speaking as her classmate, her acquaintance, and as a fellow woman,” Sayumi continued, “I don’t think I’ll be able to bear watching her lose herself to romance for very much longer.”

“Yeah, I get you.”

The tired, somber look Sayumi gave me said it all. I closed my eyes and fell into deep thought. I thought about myself, the people around me—everything that factored into my current situation.

As I brooded, Sayumi spoke up again. “In any case, let’s work together to come up with a solution. At this point, I can hardly expect you to resolve the issue all on your—”

“Nah, it’s fine. That won’t be necessary,” I said, interrupting before she could finish offering me help.

I opened my eyes, filled with a newfound resolve—a resolve to let myself be hurt, and a resolve to hurt someone else in the process. I couldn’t let myself hesitate anymore. The longer I put this off, the worse those inevitable wounds would sting.

“I’ll settle this on my own. You reap what you sow, after all.”

That very same day, I made my way over to the student council room after our club ended. I loitered around, waiting for them to finish their meeting, until Kudou finally emerged just a little after six. I told her we had to talk and led her somewhere we wouldn’t be observed: outside the art room on the first floor. And then, well…

“I am so, so sorry!”

I apologized. Profusely. I confessed that everything had been a huge misunderstanding. I explained it all from beginning to end, then I prostrated myself before her in the most heartfelt show of repentance I could think of. In the end, that was the only solution I could come up with.

“U-Umm…” The wavering tone of Kudou’s voice was enough to make me fear the worst. In all likelihood, I’d just shattered her self-esteem, at least as far as romance went. I’d done exactly what Sayumi had stopped me from trying to do the day before.

“S-So, you’re saying that the note you wrote me wasn’t a love letter after all, darling…?”

“That’s right.”

“And that name for my power, *Grateful Lover*…you really did mean to write ‘robber’ after all?”

“Right.”

“And our battle the other day… That really *was* all just a coincidence? You didn’t plan it out at all?”

“I’m so sorry, but that’s right. I was just lying to make myself look cool.”

“S-So you didn’t write that letter because you wanted to date me after all…?”

“I didn’t, but I know it’s my fault anyway. It ended up sounding really misleading, and I shouldn’t have written it that way.”

“My email address…”

“I am so sorry.” If it was going to end up this way no matter what, I should’ve spilled the beans yesterday. Maybe then it wouldn’t have been quite as painful for her.

Kudou paused for a moment. “Stand up, Andou,” she finally said. It didn’t escape my notice that she’d gone back to her old way of referring to me. “You’re a boy, aren’t you? You shouldn’t be so quick to bow down to people. Especially in this case—after all, from the sound of things, almost all of this was my fault. I’m the one who was presumptuous, and I’m the one who got the wrong idea, so I should be the one to apologize. I can tell that my misunderstanding has caused you a lot of trouble.”

I was struck by how much more cheerful Kudou sounded than I’d expected. I figured she might deck me in the face in the worst case, so I was honestly relieved for a moment. Then I looked up at her, and I gulped as that relief vanished as quickly as it had come.

“Yup, that’s right. I’m n-n-not even upset, anyway! Doesn’t bother me even a little bit! So don’t apologize like that! It actually makes this harder for me… No, I mean, for the record, I never actually liked you all that much in the first place! I just thought, hey, he asked me out, so I might as well go along with it and see…what happens…”

She was glancing around restlessly and fidgeting, her legs faintly trembling. She was still doing her best to act tough, but I could see through her effortlessly. Anybody would’ve been able to tell how shaken she was, most likely, and every bit of her body language made it plain as day that she was anything but fine.

“Kudou…I’m sorry!”

“Oh, enough with the apologies!” she snapped. “Like I said, I don’t even mind at all… Saying you’re sorry over and over makes it look like my feelings were hurt or something, so please, cut it out!”

“But, I—”

“Ahh, right! I-I forgot, I was supposed to buy ingredients so my curry can make mother for dinner! I’d better head home right away! Ha ha ha ha…” Kudou spun about and stiffly tottered away as quickly as she could manage, running into a couple of walls before finally vanishing from sight.

I, meanwhile, stayed exactly where I was, hanging my head. I slumped against a nearby wall, slowly sliding down it and sitting on the cold, hard floor of the hallway.

“Way to make a girl cry.”

A pair of legs stepped into my field of vision, and I looked up to find Tomoyo standing before me. She scowled as she glared down at me. *I thought she would've already gone home by now.*

"You're a real lady-killer, aren't you?" she jabbed sarcastically.

"Yeah, that's right. Just another mortal sin to add to the pile," I replied wearily. We'd had exchanges like that a thousand times over, but in that moment, my own words rang incredibly hollow in my ears. *I'm hella sinful...and that's hella lame.*

"Well, this was probably for the best, don't you think?" Tomoyo added curtly. "If you'd left Kudou to her own devices, she would've kept adding more and more mistakes onto her list of lifelong regrets. Cutting it off before she could hurt herself too terribly isn't the worst solution out there. Not that there *were* any other solutions, really."

"I hope you're right about that," I sighed.

"I mean, you might've been the one who kicked off the whole issue, but Kudou definitely brought it upon herself too. I'd say she's at least half responsible, so I don't think you have to beat yourself up about it quite *that* much."

"Wait, are you trying to cheer me up?"

"Wha—?! N-No way!"

"And I'm not really beating myself up that much, honestly," I clarified. "I was just thinking that I'm a pathetic excuse for a man. I mean, what sort of guy hurts a girl like that, even if it is by accident?"

"We have a term for that sort of thinking, y'know—it's called beating yourself up." Tomoyo sighed with exasperation as she sat down next to me. "Hey, while we're at it, think you could finally explain yourself?"

"About what?"

"About why you decided to name Kudou's power *Grateful Robber*."

"I already explained that, though, didn't I? 'Grateful,' as in high and mighty; 'robber,' as in one who succumbs to the deadly sin of greed and—"

"Not *that*. I mean, why'd you pick 'robber' when you could've gone with something more normal, like 'thief' or 'hunter' or whatever? If you'd called it *Grateful Hunter*, none of this would've ever happened, right?"

"Oh, *that*." It was kind of a hard question to answer, especially when she asked it so directly. I had a reason, of course, but it wasn't anything big or important enough to merit a whole explanation. And, honestly, it was just kinda embarrassing. "Y-You won't laugh, will you?"

"You kidding me? If it's funny, then you bet I will." Tomoyo gave me a look, silently pressuring me to fess up. It wasn't long before I caved under the power of her gaze and began to talk.

"It was to make the numbers match up."

"The *numbers*?"

"You know how all our powers have English names, right? And they're all two words long, if you don't count the little words like 'and' and 'of' that don't get capitalized."

“Right. ’Course, that’s just because you thought them up and made them match up like that yourself.”

Exactly. I’d thought long and hard, racking my mind for ways to give our powers’ names a sense of unity. You see that all the time in manga, right? The characters all ostensibly think up their powers’ names themselves, yet, somehow, their names just happen to magically fit together in a perfectly cohesive manner. Of course, this wasn’t the moment to dissect media tropes, so I held off on bringing that part up.

“Well, I made it so they match up when you write them in Japanese too.”

Dark and Dark, *Closed Clock*, *Over Element*, *World Create*, and *Route of Origin*. Not only was each name two words long in English (or close enough, anyway), they were also each precisely nine characters long when written out in Japanese.

“Did you notice?”

“I mean, yeah, I did…but only because you wrote them all out in both languages when you first came up with them. I only noticed ’cause you made a whole show of it, and I wrote it off as that chuuni compulsion to put a weird amount of attention to detail into stuff that doesn’t deserve it.”

Is that *what she thought I was doing? I guess I can’t deny that I was making a show of it, honestly.* “I had a lot of reasons, but the biggest one was that I wanted to give our group a really strong sense of unity.”

“A sense of unity, huh?”

Half a year ago, our powers awakened. Half a year ago, these extraordinary abilities were forced upon us with no explanation. We had no choice but to step into the world of the unknown, and we had no idea what might happen to us as a consequence of doing so. *Nothing* was off the table.

We’d all gotten along pretty well before everything went crazy, but it was totally plausible that we could be driven apart by the simplest of accidents. And so, I wanted to forge a bond between us. I designed our powers’ names to bind us together—to ensure that we’d never be driven apart, no matter what happened.

“You see plenty of series where all the powers are made up of the same number of major, capitalized words, right? But it’s not every day that you find one where they do something like that in *two* languages.” I couldn’t name a single piece of media that did that, though I also couldn’t discount the possibility that there was one somewhere that I just hadn’t read. “I wanted our bonds to be tighter than those of any other party in history. I thought they *had* to be that way, or we wouldn’t be able to get by. So that’s why I did it—for that sense of unity.”

Boy oh boy, was that ever embarrassing to admit out loud! I glanced nervously over at Tomoyo, and I was surprised to find that she wasn’t snickering or smirking at all. In fact, she’d stayed perfectly silent the whole time, listening to me in complete earnestness. My eyes met hers, and my embarrassment was suddenly amplified several times over.

“Wh-What?!” I snapped. “Lemme guess: you’re thinking how weirdly girly of me it is to obsess over stuff like that, right?!”

“No, I’m not,” replied Tomoyo with a tired sigh and a shrug. “Actually, I’m thinking about how you only ever get embarrassed about the weirdest things. You’d *think* you’d be more ashamed of how you keep your chuuni dial turned up to eleven literally all the time.”

I scowled—she really *was* making fun of me. But then she kept talking. “I get it now, though. So that’s why you went with *Grateful Robber*: it makes the Japanese spelling match up. ‘Hunter’ and ‘thief’ would both end up being a character too long.”

She was exactly right. I’d considered both of those words while I was thinking up the name, and I thought long and hard about a different first word I could use to make them the right length in total, but in the end, nothing seemed to fit just right.

“At one point I actually considered cutting to the chase and naming it *Hunter x Hunter*.”

“Just straight up plagiarism, huh?”

“Well, yeah, but that series is fair game, right? *Hunter* takes manga and movie titles, *barely* changes them, and puts them in as power names all the time.”

“You have a point, but still.”

“The *actual* reason why I decided against it is that using the same word twice would make it way too close to *Dark and Dark*.”

“Of *course* that’s why…”

I went through all sorts of prospective names over the course of my deliberations, and in the end, I settled on *Grateful Robber* as the best possible contender. Needless to say, I also came up with a name for her power’s eventual re-awakened next stage in advance.

“There’s always been five of us,” I said, “but there’s only one of her. She may not’ve had her power for very long, but she still went through all the pain we did, suffered through all the worries we agonized over…and she did it all on her own. That was her only option.”

Tomoyo fell silent, quietly listening once more.

“Plus, she’s the president of the student council. We may not be enemies now, but she can’t exactly slip away to hang out every day like the rest of us do, right? So, at the very least, I wanted her power’s name to match up with ours. She’s one of us, after all. But, well…” I hung my head again. “Kinda feels like the whole thing backfired, huh?”

“That’s not true,” said Tomoyo, breaking her silence. “Maybe you screwed up, sure. Maybe you decided to do it all in a stupidly roundabout way ’cause you’re a huge poser. But still, I’m sure that the feeling at the root of it all got through to her…or at least, like, ten percent or so of it did.”

It took a moment for the sheer kindness of Tomoyo’s words to sink in for me. I looked over at her, and I found that she’d turned her gaze up and out

a nearby window. The gentle smile on her face was lit up by the soft glow of the sunset.

A moment later, she seemed to realize I was staring at her, and she looked my way. Our eyes met, but just for a moment, before we both gave in to the awkwardness of the situation and looked away.

"A-Anyway," she practically shouted, "take this as an opportunity to learn from experience and tone down the chuuni crap a little! Actually, why not give up on it altogether?!"

"Don't call it chuuni crap! And hah! Say what you will, but however the world may change, I shall remain as I've always been: myself, nothing more and nothing less!"

"Yeah, yeah. Good for you, chuuni-boy."

"You'd better believe it…*Endless Paradox*."

"Qu-Quit calling me that!"

☆

"Eavesdropping is hardly commendable behavior, Miss Kudou."

As I strained my ears and lurked around the corner from the scene I'd just walked away from, a voice rang out behind me. I stiffened up, then slowly turned around to find my classmate, Takanashi Sayumi, strolling in my direction.

"Of course, I'm hardly one to talk," she acknowledged with a self-deprecating chuckle.

From the sound of things, she'd seen it all. She'd witnessed Andou apologizing to me, and she'd probably overheard his conversation with Kanzaki as well.

"I hope you'll find it in yourself to forgive him," Takanashi said without so much as a hint of preamble. "He means well, and he's certainly not a bad person. He's just a little too childish for his own good."

"I…can tell," I replied, doing everything I possibly could to feign an air of composure. I was liable to sprint off into the distance screeching like a madwoman if I let my guard down for even a second, so I focused every ounce of my attention on desperately keeping myself in check.

It's fine. I'm fine. I may be at my limit, but I'm still just barely fine. I haven't lost all my dignity as a woman…yet.

"If you're talking about my dar—about Andou, then I'm not mad at him anyway. Really, I'm not mad at all! I'm the one who misunderstood things, so I deserve all the blame. I'm just, well…so embarrassed that I wish I could drop dead here and now, that's all…"

What on earth am I doing? "Darling" my foot! "Forever love" my ass! Ugh… I'm feeling a sudden urge to hop on the first bus out of town, no matter where it's going.

At that point, Takanashi spoke up again. "My power's name is *Route of Origin*. That's 'route' with an 'ou,' for reference. What do you think about that? Somewhat less than cool, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I honestly agreed. "I can't even tell what it's supposed to mean."

“Your power, meanwhile, would seem to have been named *Grateful Robber*.”

That’s right. *Grateful Robber*, not *Lover*. And according to him, it was supposed to mean “a high and mighty thief.”

“What do you think?” asked Takanashi. “It’s your power, so I believe it’s perfectly within your rights to reject that name.”

“No…” I shook my head. Since that obnoxiously ambiguous name had sparked this whole disaster, you’d think I’d never want to see it or hear it again. That might be the normal reaction, honestly. And yet…

“I’ll take the name, and I’ll thank him for giving it to me.” Remarkably enough, I genuinely meant it.

“Will you, now?” said Sayumi with a smile.

“He’s a good guy, isn’t he?” I sighed.

“I’m proud to call myself his senior.”

“Sorry for all the trouble, Miss Takanashi. I bet you were hiding somewhere nearby this whole time, waiting for the right moment to come cheer me up, weren’t you? I appreciate it.”

“Miss Kudou…you’d do well to learn that sometimes, pretending not to notice that sort of gesture is your most considerate option. When you thank someone for something like that, it comes across as sarcastic.”

“You’re a good person too, you know that?” I continued, casually disregarding her advice. “It’s a shame… I really would’ve loved to compete with you for the president’s seat head-to-head.” I’d felt that way for a long time, and I’d been missing chance after chance to tell her so for just as long. In that moment, though, the words slipped out of me with ease. “I couldn’t even feel happy about winning the election in a landslide. Not when you were off the ballot.”

She didn’t have anything to say to that, so I pressed on. “I have to ask, Miss Takanashi. Is the reason why you didn’t put your name forward for the position—”

“It was because I wanted to be the president of the literary club. That was my one and only reason,” replied Takanashi, cutting me off with a perfectly constructed smile. She could hardly have drawn the line in the sand any clearer. Now it was my turn to fall silent, and in the meantime, she somewhat forcibly changed the subject. “All that aside, this certainly was a disaster. As a fellow woman, I really do sympathize from the bottom of my heart.”

“You reap what you sow. I’m resigned to it at this point.”

“Yes, you’ve always been responsible like that.”

“Plus…I wouldn’t say it was a *complete* disaster.” I walked past Takanashi and down the hallway, moving forward step by step, never pausing to look back.

I’d fallen for Andou Jurai thanks to an absurd sequence of coincidences. I thought—incorrectly—that he was smart and calculating, and that he had sent me a love letter. I’d worked myself up into an ecstatic frenzy, totally

unbeknownst to him. But when all was said and done, the part of him that I loved above all else turned out to be real after all.

"*Grateful Robber*, huh? How about..."

He always did everything he possibly could for his friends...and he said that I was one of them. I was shocked to realize just how much that meant to me.

☆

Later that evening, I got an email from Kudou. Its subject line noted that she'd changed her address.

[grateful_lover@***.ne.jp]

She'd changed it to her interpretation of the name I gave her power, of all things. I quickly opened up the email, only to find a very stiffly phrased message that more or less summed up to "I'm sorry about what happened. I won't make things weird between us, so please don't worry about it." So that was a relief! In a weird sort of way, it felt like I'd been spared from some horrible fate.

The message didn't end there, though. She also mentioned that she'd taken a liking to the name I gave her power, so she'd decided to keep using it. I felt myself crack a grin. There aren't all that many things that make me happier than having an idea or title I came up with get complimented. She'd decided to go with the slightly incorrect "lover" version, of course, but I decided to let it slide.

And so, in spite of how badly everything had spiraled out of control, the Kudou incident was more or less settled. It certainly felt like a big, significant event while we were in the thick of it, but looking back after everything was resolved, the whole thing struck me as pretty played out, plot development-wise. The villain from an early arc ends up joining the main characters' team as the story goes on—that's some classic supernatural battle stuff there, isn't it?

"Huh...?" I'd thought that was the end of the message, but then I scrolled past it to find that she'd written a postscript as well. It read:

PS I'm pretty sure you don't know what the word "grateful" means. You made it sound like you thought it's derived from "great," but it actually has nothing to do with that word at all. It's a totally unrelated adjective that means something closer to "gratitude." The word you were looking for is just "great." You don't have to modify it or anything—slapping a "ful" on the end doesn't work for *every* English word.

In short, you messed up your translation. It's not even remotely accurate, even if you do give some leeway for artistic license. "Grateful Lover" doesn't mean "high and mighty thief;" it means "someone who always appreciates their romantic partner." *That's* what I thought you were trying to say back when I got your letter.

Your college entrance exams are coming up next year. If I were you, I would focus a little harder on my English studies.

I chucked my cellphone at my bed, fled my house, and dashed through the moonlit streets as fast as my legs could carry me in a distraught frenzy.

God dammit all, this is exactly why I can't stand smart people!

○ Month △ Day

Juu gave me a new nickname today: Flaming Phoenix.

I'm not really sure what it means, but according to him, it's really, really cool. It didn't catch on with my other friends at all, but thanks to him trying to spread it, everyone stopped calling me "Yakitori." Juu saved me from that awful nickname.

I got curious about the new name, so I asked mom about it and looked "phoenix" up in the dictionary. Apparently, it's a flaming bird, or a bird that comes back to life after it burns up, or something like that.

I wonder if burning up hurts them? It must, right? It's like they're getting cooked.

Wait a minute. They're birds that get cooked?

How's that any different from yakitori?!

—Excerpt from Hatoko's elementary school diary

Chapter 4: Literature——Activities

My body was awash with heat. My heart throbbed in my chest, accelerating my pulse and forcing the blood through my veins in powerful bursts. Wisps of steam rose from my red-tinged skin, wafting through the air in twisting, coiling plumes, almost like billowing clouds of smoke.

That heat was the proof of my development—the proof that all my abilities had just evolved to the next level.

"Gear…Two!"

"Quit playing Luffy and lemme use the bathroom already, doofus!"

"Aaugh?!"

Just as I was crouching down to plant my fist on the floor and imitate a certain legendary pose, I ate a full-force kick from behind. Thanks to the whole posing thing, I was totally unprepared to break my fall; I landed head-first, ringing my Gum-Gum Bell on the floor.

"Gah, whyyy?! I'm supposed to be rubber, so why does it hurt this much?! Our friggin' floor knows how to use Haki!"

As I clutched at my head and writhed in agony, I heard a voice from behind me. "Sheesh, this is exactly why I keep telling you to let me take the first bath! I don't wanna have to use your dirty bathwater."

The ingrate who spoiled my sacred post-bath ritual was none other than my very own sister, Andou Machi. She was a first-year in college, and her decent-ish looks were offset by her certifiably atrocious personality.

"Mwa ha ha… Fear not, oh sister of mine! The cursed taint that stains my mortal form could never be washed away by something so trifling as hot water! Ablutions are powerless against the depths of my sin!"

"Try saying that again when your ass *isn't* hanging out in plain view, mister poser."

"Gah!" I quickly readjusted the towel I'd wrapped around my waist. *That was close! Nobody's looking for a wardrobe malfunction from* me*, that's for sure!* "Oh, just you wait! I'll get you back for this someday, I swaaugh?!"

I was about to jump up and really give her what-for, but then she stepped on me. Specifically, on my rear. Let the record show that there are few things more humiliating than lying facedown on the floor and having someone walk all over your backside.

"'Scuse me?" growled Machi. "You say something?"

"I'm sorry, oh beloved sister of mine."

"That's more like it."

My rear end was freed from the crushing weight of oppression. I stood up and fixed my towel again as Machi strolled into the dressing room, slammed the door shut, and locked it. It's an unspoken rule in the world of nerd media that girls never lock dressing rooms and boys never knock before walking into them, but there wasn't an unspoken rule out there that my sister wouldn't trample over.

“Oh, right—Jurai!” Machi called out from the changing room. I was starting to feel that post-bath chill and was about to head up to my room, but I stopped in my tracks. “Mom said she’s got a neighborhood women’s association meeting tomorrow, so she’ll be out for the night.”

“For real? What’re we gonna do for dinner?”

“You mean what’re *you* gonna do for dinner. Make something.”

“No way! Why don’t *you* cook? *You’re* the girl here, supposedly.”

“Society’s moving toward gender equality these days. ‘Girls do all the housework’ is a standard that died out ages ago.”

I’m pretty sure the gender equality endgame isn’t to validate girls who couldn’t do housework to save their lives, but whatever. “You know you’re never gonna learn to cook if you keep this up, right?”

“I *can* cook! I just *don’t* cook. If I actually wanted to, I could knock out a meal any time.”

Yup, there’s the stock excuse you always hear from people who can’t cook. I wasn’t exactly a master chef myself, to be fair, so I didn’t really have any right to judge. “Man, what am I supposed to do?” I wondered. “We just ordered out for pizza the other day, and I really don’t wanna end up eating instant ramen for dinner…”

While I was scratching my head, I heard Machi say “Oh, I know!” like she’d just had an idea. “Why don’t you just summon Hatoko?”

“*Summon* her? Seriously?”

“Hatoko’s such an easy card to use! You don’t even have to Tribute any other monsters to summon her.”

“You could at least call her a Ritual Monster, y’know.”

Hatoko and Machi were on pretty good terms with each other. Hatoko came over to my house to play all the time when we were in elementary school, and my sister ended up joining in with us on a fairly regular basis. Our parents also loved having her around. Really, the Andou and Kushikawa households were as fast of family friends as you could find.

All that said, I hadn’t even considered calling Hatoko in to help until that moment. Surprisingly enough, considering Machi suggested it, it was actually sort of ingenious. Hatoko never gave the impression of being especially well put together at school, but as far as housework was concerned, she was practically a master. Her cooking was top-notch as well.

“I’ll try asking her,” I agreed.

“Cool,” replied Machi. Then she dropped into an ever so slightly more serious tone. “Hatoko’s a really good girl, isn’t she? Wish I had a little sister like her instead of a dumbass like you.”

“I’m with you on that one—I’d take a big sister like her over you any day.” *Actually, I’d take pretty much anyone who doesn’t kick people from behind.*

“You don’t run into many kids as nice as her these days. Considering she’s put up with your stupid crap for over a decade now, I figure she must be the reincarnation of some saint or something.”

“How many times have you called me stupid in the past minute? Just how big of a moron do you think I am?”

“Either that, or she’s Fabre reborn.”

“Let me guess—you’re insinuating that I’m like the insects he studied, right?”

“I swear, we should be sending that girl monthly child support payments.”

“Okay, we’ve gotta draw the line on you belittling me *somewhere*.”

“You’d better treat her right,” she said, her voice suddenly quiet and her tone deeply serious. “Got that?”

“Yeah, I got it,” I replied, walking away from the door. I’d been hanging out half-naked for way too long at that point.

“Ah, wait up a sec, Jurai!”

“What?”

“Forgot my towel. Go grab one for me.”

“Get it yourself!”

“C’mon, I’m naked in here!”

“Okay, *fine*,” I reluctantly agreed. I was as tragically incapable of fighting back against my sister as ever.

“Sure! Okay!”

The next morning, I met up with Hatoko on the way to school and asked if she’d be willing to cook for Machi and me that night. Surprisingly, she agreed without a second thought. I was starting to appreciate why my sister described her as “easy to use.”

“Sorry for asking at the last minute like this,” I said.

“It’s okay! I don’t mind at all,” she replied. If she was upset, then she was doing a really good job of pretending otherwise. In that moment, I was really glad to have her around. “I’m excited, actually! It feels like it’s been forever since I’ve been over to your house!”

“I think the last time was…when we were in the second year of middle school, probably?” I speculated.

“That sounds right. Yeah…that must’ve been the last time.”

Oh, right. That’d mean she hasn’t come over since everything that happened that year went down.

“Machi’s gonna be home, right?” asked Hatoko. “Oh, jeez, I haven’t seen her in ages! I’m starting to feel a little nervous! How’s she been lately?”

“Great. Obnoxiously so.”

“That’s good to hear!”

We chatted casually as we strolled through the neighborhood. The two of us had stopped walking to school during the later years of elementary school. It was just kinda embarassing to be seen walking with a member of the opposite sex, I guess—or really, it was inevitable that we’d be teased relentlessly by half of our class if we got caught.

Ever since we got into high school, though, we'd started walking together again. Basically, nobody got on our case about that sort of stuff anymore, so there was no reason not to. At our age, being the perpetrator of that sort of teasing would probably be more humiliating than being its victim.

"Hey, is there anything in particular you want me to make?" asked Hatoko.

"Nah, anything's good."

She frowned. "Hmph! That's the least helpful answer you could possibly give, you know?"

"Okay, then meat and potato stew, only without the potatoes, carrots, onion, and konjac noodles."

"At that point, all that's left is the meat!"

Our classes that day passed by without any noteworthy events whatsoever. As I packed my stuff up after the final homeroom of the day, Miss Satomi called out to me from the front of the class. Her trademark sleep mask was propped up on her forehead—today's had "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead" written on it. *Come on, that's the last thing you should be printing on a sleep mask!*

"Takanashi asked me for these, so here, I'll pass 'em off to you," she said, handing me a bundle of papers. "Guess she wants to use them for your club meeting today."

"Sayumi asked for them?" I inspected the bundle and found that it was one big stack of the sort of paper people use to handwrite manuscripts. "Why? What's the deal with these?"

"Beats me. I didn't ask."

"Aren't you supposed to be our faculty advisor?"

"According to Takanashi, the best way for me to advise you guys is to sit back and do nothing unless she specifically asks me for it. She's gotta be one of the most independent students I've ever had. I like the way she operates."

"You realize that just means she's not willing to count on you, right?!" Sayumi was treating Miss Satomi like a sad, ostracized office drone her superiors couldn't trust enough to give any real work! Not that I couldn't understand the impulse to leave everything to Sayumi, the certifiable superwoman.

"Oh, right, while I'm at it, I've been meaning to talk to you about something. Chifuyu's been hanging out with your club an awful lot lately, hasn't she?"

That struck me as a pretty abrupt question, but on the other hand, she *was* Chifuyu's aunt. It'd make sense for her to have a vested interest there. "Yeah, she has," I replied. "Pretty much every day, actually."

"Thought so. That's good, I guess." Her tone came across as a little more serious than it usually did. I could tell that her niece's well-being meant a

lot to her. At the very least, the attitude she took when talking about her was notably different than how she talked about her students. “Her school’s not exactly close by. She must be working pretty hard to make that happen.”

The truth, of course, was that *World Create* let her warp between our schools in the blink of an eye. Chifuyu didn’t have to work at all to visit us, much less work hard, but needless to say, Miss Satomi had no clue about any of that stuff.

“She must really like you guys, huh?”

“It’d be nice if you’re right about that.”

“Just one thing, Andou: don’t get too used to this situation. It isn’t ordinary, and you shouldn’t let yourself think it is,” she said, her eyes locked on to mine. If I had to describe her usual gaze, I’d say that it gave a kindly, laid-back sort of impression, but in that moment, it was anything but. There was a sharp and perceptive glint to her eyes.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“I mean that it’s not normal for an elementary schooler to have a bunch of high schoolers as her social circle, that’s all. Later.” Miss Satomi left it at that, yawning as she wandered out of the classroom.

I glanced down at the papers in my hands. She said that Sayumi wanted them for our club activities, and I was pretty sure I could guess what we’d be using them for. We were, after all, the literary club.

And so, as expected, the moment our club meeting began, our resident president proposed an activity. “It’s been quite a long while, so I was thinking that this would be a good day for us to write short stories,” said Sayumi.

Considering the club she presided over, she could hardly have come up with a more appropriate suggestion. “That sounds good to me! Might as well do some actual literary activities every once in a while,” I said, looking around at the other members.

Tomoyo and Hatoko quickly agreed, but Chifuyu seemed a little ambivalent. “I’ve never written one of those,” she muttered.

“Oh, right, that makes sense,” I said with a nod. The last time we’d done any actual writing in our club was the story relay we wrote a while back, and Chifuyu hadn’t participated in that one. “Hmm... Well, it’ll probably be fine anyway. You don’t have to overthink this, Chifuyu. Just have fun with it.”

“That’s right,” agreed Sayumi. “This is just a game, nothing more. We’ll simply think up stories on the fly to pass the time, like indolent nobles in the Heian era.”

“I’ll try it, then,” said Chifuyu with a cheerful nod.

“Okay, so what’re we gonna do, specifically?” I asked, moving the conversation along. “Another story relay?”

“No, not this time. We’ll do another relay sometime when you can’t make it to the meeting. We voted unanimously to exclude you from those in the future, after all.”

“Wait, that wasn’t just a punch line?” They’re actually planning on never letting me participate in a story relay ever again? It’s not like I’m super torn up by the idea of not doing any more of those, but still, that kinda stings...

While I was busy being mildly heartbroken, Tomoyo raised her hand. “Are we at least going to have some sort of guidelines for what we write about? Or a theme, or something?”

“Let’s see...” said Sayumi, resting her chin in her hand as she lapsed into thought for a moment. “How about we write short stories with the theme ‘light novels’ in mind?”

Oh ho? It was certainly an unorthodox theme to choose. Normally, you’d expect a genre, like fantasy or mystery, or a situation, like “a school’s entrance ceremony” or “a field day.” But no—our theme would be “light novels.” I stole a glance at Tomoyo, curious about how she’d react to the suggestion. She looked a little tense. I’d expected her to have somewhat mixed feelings about the theme, and from the look of things, I was right.

“Hatokooo,” said Chifuyu, tugging at Hatoko’s sleeve. “What’s a ‘light novel’?”

Oh, Chifuyu... Of all the people to ask about that, you had to go and pick the one who’s least qualified out of all of us to explain. There’s absolutely no way she’ll be able to come up with an answer for—

“Light novels are books that are written for kids in middle school and high school! Their covers have pictures that look like they came straight out of some anime on them, and they usually have at least a few illustrations inside as well!” explained Hatoko.

I was shocked—she’d nailed it without missing a beat. I mean, the term’s surprisingly hard to pin down perfectly, and there were a few parts of her definition that I took umbrage with, but she’d hit all the main points in an easy to understand way.

“You know about light novels, Hatoko? I’m a little surprised,” said Tomoyo.

“I sure do! Juu used to lend me them sometimes, so I sorta get the gist.”

“Ah, that’d explain it.”

“I *used* to,” I cut in, emphasizing the past-tense part.

I’d almost forgotten that I used to lend her books all the time. Back then, I’d really wanted somebody else to know about and appreciate the things that I liked. Hatoko, however, never really seemed to get it. After having grown up a little, though, it didn’t really bother me all that much anymore. I’d come to understand that some people just like different things when it comes to literature.

“There’s no need to be concerned about what you write, Chifuyu,” said Sayumi. “Just start writing and see where it goes! I’m certain you’ll enjoy it.”

“Okay,” agreed Chifuyu with a nod. “I’ll try it.”

Thus, the literary club began an all-new activity revolving around the theme of light novels! If we’d given ourselves as much time as we wanted, we’d have probably never finished, so we decided to set a limit of one hour to write our stories in. We’d fill up as many pages of manuscript paper as we possibly could over that period.

Since an hour was such a restrictive time limit, we also decided that it was all right to either write an outline of a story in broad strokes or the opening scenes of a longer story in more detail. Whatever we picked, as soon as the hour was up, we’d have to stop writing and share our results.

“And…that’s time,” said Sayumi as she looked up at the clock an hour later. I immediately set down my pen. “Now then,” she continued, “If anyone would care to go first, go ahead and raise your hand.”

“Me, meee!”

“Me.”

Two members’ hands quickly shot up: Hatoko’s and Chifuyu’s.

“In that case, let’s start with Hatoko,” decided Sayumi.

“All right!” said Hatoko, proudly spreading her manuscript out on the table. “My goal with this story was to make it as realistic as I could!”

We leaned in and began to read.

Cute Lil Ai

Well, the title sure is lame. Not even an interesting sort of lame either. It was a perfectly ordinary, utterly unremarkable sort of lame. Lame enough that it somehow wrapped around and became perfect again. We wouldn’t get anywhere if we started off poking holes in the title, though, so I brushed it off and read on.

To make a short story shorter, Hatoko’s piece was a rom-com starring a boy named Takeru and his childhood friend, Ai.

[Opening pages omitted]

Takeru opened the door to the changing room, but oh no! His childhood friend Ai was changing inside! Takeru got an eyeful of Ai in her undies.

“Kyaaa! Wh-What’re you doing in here?!”

“Oh, jeez! I-It’s not what you think, this was an accident! I didn’t mean to!”

“Shut up, you pervert! Diiie!”

Ai jabbed her fingers into Takeru’s eyes, and he crumpled to the floor in pain.

Oooh, okay, I’m pretty impressed! Never thought Hatoko would put a fanservice scene like this into one of her stories. She really does get how light novels work! Would’ve been nice if she’d put a bit more effort into

describing how the heroine looked, but meh, that's what illustrators are for.

As Takeru writhed, clutching at his eyes, liquid began to dribble out from between his fingers.

Wait. Huh?

That liquid was a mixture of Takeru's blood and tears. Ai looked down at her own hand to find it stained the same reddish-brown color, and she screamed in horror. Meanwhile, Takeru continued to convulse, a massive amount of blood now pouring out from around his hands.

"I-I'm sorry!" cried Ai. "I didn't mean to! I just got so mad, I… I-I'll call for help!"

Ai pulled out her phone and called for an ambulance, her blood-soaked hands staining the phone's buttons.

Umm.

Takeru was rushed to the emergency room, and thankfully, the operation prevented the worst from happening. His retinas were crushed, however, and they were far too damaged for modern medicine to restore. He was blinded, and his eyesight would never return.

Takeru's parents took the case to court, and Ai was convicted of assault. Because she was a minor, however, Ai was spared a prison sentence and was released on probation.

The day the trial ended, Ai went to visit Takeru in the hospital. He lay there on the sterile, white bed, a bandage wrapped around his head hiding away his eyes.

"Takeru…I'm so sorry! What can I possibly do to make this right?!"

"It's okay, Ai."

"Huh?"

"This is my fault. I never noticed how you felt about me, and God decided to punish me for it."

"…"

"Hey, Ai? I can't see anymore, so could you come a little closer? Close enough that I can reach you with my hands?"

"All right…"

Takeru's eyes may have lost their light…but from that day on, a different sort of brilliance would light up his life instead.

"What the *hell* did I just read?!"

I lost it. I couldn't help myself. I mean, holy *crap*, there were just so many holes worth picking in that story!

"What's wrong, Juu? Oh, did you think the parts about his operation and the trial were too vague? I don't know very much about medicine or law, so cut me some slack!"

"It's not that! Nobody cares if you gloss over those bits!"

Where do I even start? Ai wasn't even a little bit cute, for one thing! Then there's the fact that Takeru was way too understanding, and the way Hatoko tried to tie it all together in a super forced heartwarming ending was obnoxious. But no, none of that is even close to the core problem with her story.

"Why the hell would you have him go *blind* from getting poked in the eyes?!"

"I thought it'd be more realistic that way!"

"Nobody wants that sort of realism in their stories!"

"See, I remembered reading a scene like that in one of the light novels you loaned me way back whenever, and I couldn't stop thinking about how dangerous it would be if a little kid read a scene like that and decided to imitate it."

"Little kids don't read light novels in the first place! Probably."

"So this is my version of a light novel's…ani-thesis? Anime-sis?"

"You mean antithesis?"

"Yeah, that!"

I sighed. It seemed there were some things that even Hatoko felt a need to poke holes in. That said, being pedantic about *that* sort of realism in a work of fiction just struck me as embarrassing. I mean, getting poked in the eyes is pretty low-level as far as casual rom-com violence goes! Think about all the protagonists who get assaulted with wooden swords, or *real* swords, or even *guns* when a heroine goes ballistic on them. Or a fork…but I guess *that* one's hero-on-heroine violence, so it's sorta different.

"I believe that female characters subjecting their male counterparts to violence is essentially just a stock storytelling device," said Sayumi, launching into one of her trademark expository speeches. "It's not just limited to light novels either. It's been a prominent technique as far back as *City Hunter*. To put it simply, that sort of violence is nothing more than a comedic segue—a punch line, if you will. It brings a comedic exchange to a stop and allows the scene to move on smoothly. It's just slapstick, essentially, so drawing attention to it and questioning it on a logical basis comes across as ever so slightly childish."

"Oh, I get it now!" said Hatoko with a nod and a satisfied smile. "If it works by slapstick comedy standards, then that sort of thing wouldn't count as violence at all, so long as the person doing it means well!"

That was a good example on Sayumi's part. Considering Hatoko's love of comedy, using it to explain things was a really solid way of helping get the point across to her.

“So, yeah. Sorry, Hatoko, but your story’s rejected,” I declared.

“Aww…wait. What does that mean? What happens if it gets rejected?”

I paused. *Huh. That’s actually a good question.* Whatever the case, we were pretty much through with discussing her story, and Chifuyu’s was up next.

“I tried to make mine realistic too,” said Chifuyu, glaring at Hatoko. I guess she was a little miffed that they’d accidentally chosen the same theme, and judging by the way Hatoko was glaring right back at her, the feeling was mutual. I could practically see the sparks flying between the two of them.

She’d accidentally put her story in direct competition to Hatoko’s, but considering how Hatoko’s story had turned out, the odds seemed overwhelmingly stacked in Chifuyu’s favor. It sort of felt like going through the whole evaluation process would be beating a dead horse, but we couldn’t *not* check out Chifuyu’s story. I started by reading its title.

The Best Fantasy Story Ever

Setting the bar a bit high, aren’t you, Chifuyu?! That’s the unshakable confidence of youth for you! Suddenly, it felt like Hatoko might give her a run for her money after all. Or, really, it felt like I was about to witness an absolutely breathtaking race to the bottom of the barrel.

“There’s something that’s always bothered me about manga and anime,” said Chifuyu.

“Oh? And what would that be?” I asked, giving her the perfect setup to explain herself.

Chifuyu stood up tall and proud as she stepped up onto her imaginary soapbox. “Why does everyone always speak the same language, no matter what country they’re from?”

An uncomfortable silence descended upon the club room. One of those awkward atmospheres where the most you can bring yourself to say is “Uhh.”

“It’s really weird. There are a ton of languages in the world, but in manga and anime, everyone always understands each other. It doesn’t make sense. It’s illogical.”

Okay, I mean, it’s not that I don’t get where you’re coming from! You see stories that are set in another world where everyone speaks Japanese but also have English titles for no explicable reason, or stories with characters who aren’t even human but have powers with names in Spanish or Italian, seemingly just because they sound stylish that way. It makes you want to ask what on earth the characters’ first language is supposed to be, anyway? But still, though…this might be an even more embarrassing writing contrivance to call out than the heroines getting violent thing.

“So this is my antithesis for that,” declared Chifuyu, cheerfully dropping a word she definitely heard for the first time about a minute ago and

pointing at her manuscript as if to urge us to get reading. I had a bad feeling about where this was going, but I reluctantly gave it a look in spite of myself.

Unyaa 3029 Goweh.
Gigitokinozie, nogmbatakh. Dogiginyaa.
“Sogogoki tsunaku, dodoronowou unyaa?”
“Unyaa. Shigaokayukt guguno.”
“Unyaa…”

“What sort of language is this?!” Is it supposed to be the Gurongi language? Or maybe they’re just mumbling through their lines like the lead actor in Kamen Rider: Blade? Come on, people, we speak Rinto here!

“It’s Unyaaese,” answered Chifuyu. “It’s the national language of the country this story’s set in.”

“U-Unyaaese?”

“I made it up.”

“You came up with a whole constructed language for your story?!”

Chifuyu gave a proud little nod. Okay, I’ll admit that casually inventing your own language is sort of incredible, but it’s also a total waste of effort!

“Okay,” I said after a moment of hesitation, “but you know that we can’t understand what the characters are saying this way, right?”

“But everyone in their country speaks Unyaaese. It would be weird if they didn’t.”

“*Right*, but—”

“I don’t get why characters in stories that don’t happen in Japan always talk in Japanese. It’s weird, and I don’t like it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that one.

“So if you write a story in a different world, you have to come up with a different language!” declared Chifuyu, her fists clenched and her will ironclad.

She’s not wrong, exactly—having everyone speak Japanese is sort of a cop-out, but still…

“By the way,” Chifuyu continued, “if you translate the scene into Japanese, it says this:”

Year 3029 of the Unyaa Era.
Two men stand before a big castle.
“Man, sure is hot today, isn’t it?”
“No, I wouldn’t say it’s that bad.”
“Oh…”

“What a completely pointless conversation!” *Pointless and weirdly surreal to boot!* It felt like I’d just gotten a distressingly clear snapshot of what life looked like in Chifuyu-land.

“Oh, Andou, read this part! There’s a really good joke...here...pff, ha ha ha!”

“If it’s funny enough to make the person who wrote it crack up then I’d love to read it, but I’m not exactly fluent in Unyaaese...”

“And this part’s the main character’s catchphrase: ‘Gaojauraunyaa!’ He’s so cool!”

“I can tell that it’s a pretty intense line, at the very least!” Not that I could read it. At all.

“If you translate it into Japanese, it says ‘Graaahhhhhhhhh!’”

“He’s just screaming?! That’s it?!” I looked over Chifuyu’s story one more time, but, unsurprisingly, I still couldn’t parse so much as a word of it. It was all Unyaa to me. *I suddenly have a much deeper appreciation for why people in manga always speak Japanese, no matter where the story’s set.*

In the end, since nobody could actually read Chifuyu’s story, we judged it impossible to evaluate. Hatoko and Chifuyu’s realism showdown ended in...a draw, I guess? Close enough, anyway.

“Well then,” said Sayumi, “let’s move on to a new story. Would you care to go next, Andou?”

“Mwa ha ha,” I quietly chuckled. “So my time has finally arrived, has it? I suppose there really is no fighting against the fates.” I laid my manuscript, the very embodiment of my soul itself, upon the table for all to see. “As for my story’s theme...I chose ‘Dazai Osamu’!”

A wave of discomfort surged through the room. Everyone except for me looked bewildered, and I was delighted by their confusion.

“Hey, Juu?” said Hatoko. “How can Dazai be a theme for a short story?”

“Mwa ha ha ha! Are you curious? You are, aren’t you?! My powers of expression and creativity are simply too sophisticated for you to follow! I can hardly blame you. I *do* have a history of thinking up concepts that an ordinary human would find downright unfath—”

“So basically, your story’s an homage to Dazai?” said Tomoyo, cutting me off.

Curses! She read me like a book!

Hatoko, however, cocked her head. She was obviously still confused. “It’s a...fromage?”

“‘*Homage*,’ not ‘fromage.’” I sighed, then went on to explain the concept in simple terms. I told her that writing an homage to someone means writing a work that’s similar to theirs, going out of your way to emulate qualities of their style. It’s a way of showing your respect for an author, basically.

“Huuuh! So it means you’re ripping them off?”

“Don’t say *that*, you’re making it sound like it’s a bad thing! Besides, all of Dazai’s copyrights lapsed ages ago, so it doesn’t count as ripping them off regardless.”

I mean, a rip-off’s still a rip-off, no matter when the original was written, but from a legal perspective, I was in the clear. If nobody’s around to sue

you, then the law is rendered powerless! That's how publishing houses can get away with putting out new editions of old famous works like Dazai's without *really* owning the rights to them.

Y'know how you sometimes see characters in original fiction who are supposed to be the descendants of other people's famous characters, like Sherlock Holmes or Arsène Lupin? Well, they only get away with that because of copyrights lapsing, or so I've heard. I guess there are a lot of other reasons as well, but I never bothered learning 'em.

"Hey, Andou," said Chifuyu, "who's Dazai Osamu?"

I guess Chifuyu's not up to date on her mid-twentieth century authors. No real surprise there, of course. She *was* in elementary school. I gave her a quick rundown on the guy—how he was one of Japan's most famous and well-respected authors, and how he'd written famous works like *No Longer Human*, *Run, Melos!* and *The Setting Sun*.

Chifuyu's face lit up. "Oh, I know *Run, Melos!*" she exclaimed, satisfied that she was now on the same page as us.

"Let's just read it already," said Tomoyo, who was rapidly running out of patience. "We can't exactly judge it if we don't."

"Heh! You'd best prepare yourselves to be struck dumb with awe!"

"Yeah, yeah, spare us the preamble."

I laid my manuscript out on the table, and everyone leaned in to read its title.

Fly, Melos!

"*Ooof*," Tomoyo cringed. I glanced around at the others and found them recoiling as well.

Right? Right?! I knew it—they've been blindsided by the sheer majesty of my talent for titles!

"Well, guess I was struck dumb after all," said Tomoyo. "You've gone so far overboard at this point I almost have to respect it. I can't believe you could make the title *this* chuuni-riffic by changing a single word."

"Right?! I bet Dazai's weeping tears of joy in his grave right about now!" I boasted.

"More like rolling in his grave."

"I was *really* tempted to go with 'Make Haste, Melos!' Took me right up until the end to pick between the two, but I decided to go with 'fly' since I wanted to liken Melos's desperate sprint to the blowing of a raging gale!"

"Of all the stupid things to be particular about..." Tomoyo sighed and shook her head.

"All right, time for the next one!" I declared.

"Wait...what? That's it? Doesn't 'Fly, Melos!' have, like, a *story*?" asked Tomoyo.

“Well, see, the thing is, you *could* say that the title’s the whole deal, or that it’s one of those stories where the title gets announced, like, years before the actual book comes out…”

“So you didn’t bother coming up with anything else.”

“This story’s what they call a one-liner!”

“It was one line, that’s for sure!”

I wasn’t finished there, though. I’d prepared another short story to show off to the group!

CATEGORY ERROR: No Longer Human

“You can’t just add a cool prefix and call it a totally different story!”

“Huh? Do you really think the prefix is cool, Tomoyo?”

“Wha—ah, n-no! Not even close!”

Mwa! Ha! Haaa! You’ve done it now, Tomoyo—in your haste to drop a comeback, you accidentally admitted your true feelings! Oh man, this rules! Tomoyo actually complimented me!

“I must admit, I’ve impressed myself with this one. ‘Category Error’ and ‘No Longer Human’ sound *so* much cooler together than they do in isolation! In fact, I like it so much I think I just might use it as one of my personal titles!”

“How many titles are you going to give yourself before you’re satisfied?!”

“I’m sure Dazai’s absolutely trembling with joy as we speak!”

“More like watching you from the afterlife and muttering, ‘His has been a life of much shame!’”

Huh. Tomoyo’s read an awful lot of Dazai, hasn’t she?

At that point, Sayumi jumped into the conversation. “So, Andou, does CATEGORY ERROR: No Longer Human have an actual story? Or is it just a ‘one-liner’ as well?”

“Perish the thought! You should learn not to underestimate me, Sayumi. I’ve gone to great lengths to plan out the story for this one!” I slapped down a second page of manuscript paper.

“And this would be?”

“A summary of the backstory! You won’t be able to understand the plot without knowing some of the information in here, so you have to read it first.”

Sayumi fell silent, and her expression vanished. Like, seriously, the look on her face was *perfectly* blank and neutral. Part of me was curious what her deal was, but instead of questioning it, I decided to give my own absolutely stellar worldbuilding document a second read through.

Dramatis Personae:

Protagonist: Category Error (real name unknown until it’s revealed during the climax)

Appearance: Hair as white as snow. Eyes the color of crimson blood. Small in stature and youthful in appearance, but occasionally flashes a smile so cruel and inhumane it could send a chill down anyone's spine.

Personality: Fundamentally expressionless and emotionless. Treats everyone with the same cold, contemptuous indifference and enjoys solitude. In battle, however, his ruthless side comes to the forefront. He revels in the sight of blood, but at the same time, he despises himself for that joy and considers his own existence to be stained and sullied.

Background: From an early age, the protagonist endured training so harsh and brutal it all but amounted to torture. On his seventh birthday, however, he murdered his own parents, fled his household, and abandoned the name they had given him.

Twisted as it was, his family background granted him combat capabilities that far exceeded those of an ordinary human, and he took pride in his strength. His humanity, however, had vanished, and he lacked so much as a spark of emotion. Thus, the people around him scorned him as a man no longer human: a Category Error.

Powers: The protagonist has two superpowers: *Accel Brain* and *Brain Freeze*. Both are some of the strongest mental-type powers in existence. Although people ordinarily only have a single power each, strangely enough, the protagonist can use two. This is due to the existence of his dark side, Midnight: a second personality that awakened over the course of his childhood combat training.

Although the protagonist is unaware of the alternate personality lurking inside him, Midnight's influence on him has been known to occasionally manifest outwardly. In particular, Midnight's excessive cruelty and murderous thirst for blood take over whenever the protagonist's emotions run wild or whenever he's put into a life or death situation.

***Accel Brain*: Accelerates the speed of the protagonist's thought processes to 23.125 times that of an ordinary person.**

***Brain Freeze*: Freezes a portion of the target's memories, rendering it inaccessible to their active train of thought. For instance, if he were to freeze "using my hands," the target's hands would be rendered immobile, and if he were to freeze "knives," the target would cease to perceive knives on a conceptual level.**

Technically speaking, *Accel Brain* is Midnight's power, not the protagonist's. As such, when the protagonist uses it, he's only able to unlock thirty percent of its full potential.

Catchphrase: "Embrace your suffering and pass on!"

"Urp!" For some reason, Tomoyo brought a hand to her mouth as if she were fighting back a wave of nausea. "Oh god, I feel so *bloated*... It's like

my stomach's packed to bursting! It's like there's an indescribable sense of discomfort and a strangely intense sense of shame fighting for dominance inside me..."

"A-Are you okay, Tomoyo?" asked Hatoko, who hurried over to pat Tomoyo on the back.

"I'm sorry," groaned Sayumi, "but I think I need a minute as well..."

"My tummy feels all weird and gross too," moaned Chifuyu.

"Wh-Wh-What? What's wrong, everyone?" asked a bewildered Hatoko. She was the only one who *wasn't* left slumped over in their seat.

"I guess Hatoko's lack of chuuni know-how helped her dodge the bullet," Tomoyo listlessly speculated. "Too bad for Chifuyu—she might've gotten off easy too if she hadn't figured the concept out the other day... Urp!"

"So, the sheer chuuni power of his work was so great, it could indiscriminately damage anyone who so much as understands the concept of 'chuuni,' even vaguely..." Sayumi droned.

"Andou, you're scary..." added Chifuyu. *Nobody's mincing words today, huh?*

If I were to rank them by order of damage sustained, it'd go something to the tune of Tomoyo > Sayumi > Chifuyu >>> an impenetrable brick wall >>> Hatoko. I guess the damage they took was directly proportional to their innate chuuni power—whatever the hell that's supposed to mean.

"Hey, c'mon, guys, you didn't even read all the way to the end!" I protested. "You still haven't read about the main heroine, who's known as the Ephemeral Slayer and is the only person in the world to possess *Magick Annul*, the power to cancel out other people's powers! Or the sub-heroine who can use *Fossa Magna*, the power to cleave whole islands in—"

"Stop, *please*, just stop! You're gonna give me a heart attack, and *not* out of excitement!" Tomoyo wailed. "The most repulsive form of chuuni is to force innocent people who don't know better to read your cringey backstories and to use others merely for your own self-satisfaction!"

"What, so I'm the final boss of JoJo Part Five?!"

"You haven't even realized that you're a chuuni...and that makes you the lowest, vilest form of chuuni there could be!"

"Nope, guess I'm the final boss of Part Six now!"

It was pretty rare for Tomoyo to be the one to initiate that sort of absurd, reference-humor laden exchange, but thankfully I was able to slip into her usual role and play out the bit pretty decently. *Weird—it's like we're perfectly in sync with each other in the stupidest way possible.*

"Whatever!" shouted Tomoyo. "That's more than enough backstories and setting details! Show us your actual story already, Andou!"

"Err..." I awkwardly glanced away.

"Andou?" she repeated, glaring suspiciously at me.

"By the time I finished writing the backstory...I'd already used up the whole hour," I whispered. Let the record show that I told them I'd gone to

great lengths to plan out the story. I never actually said that I'd *written* any of it. Behold, the magic of semantics!

Tomoyo silently gaped at me. She looked like she *really* wanted to say something but had found herself at a loss for words. The rules had been to write whatever we could within the time limit, and technically speaking, writing nothing but a backstory didn't violate those guidelines, so she didn't actually have any reasonable grounds to criticize me for it.

In any case, with that, my turn came to a close.

"Now then, I believe I will present my story next." All eyes in the room fell upon Sayumi as she gathered up her manuscript. "As for my theme…I didn't have anything specific in mind, frankly, but if I had to assign one to my piece in retrospect, I suppose it would be 'chuunibyou.'"

I *wanted* to shout "What?!" deep down, but unfortunately, doing so would be functionally equivalent to acknowledging that I myself had a case of chuunibyou, so I had to hold it back and feign indifference. Being a chuuni's the coolest thing ever, sure, but part of me still didn't want to admit that I was one. It's complicated, okay? I'm complicated!

Sayumi let a chuckle slip out and cracked a smile as she glanced over at me. "Now then, allow me to present to you my light novel."

I, the Demon Lord, am the Servant of a Magical Girl?!

Okay, that's a light novel all right! I know I probably shouldn't admit it, but it was an *intensely* light novel-esque title. The story itself was a boy-meets-girl sort of affair, starring a perfectly normal high schooler protagonist who suddenly meets a beautiful self-proclaimed mage named Eris. It turns out that Eris sought him out because he's the descendant of a line of demon lords, and she wants to make him into her servant. After plenty of shenanigans, she finally gets hold of some real blackmail material.

[Opening pages omitted]

"That's right! And if you don't want your secret spread far and wide, your only choice is to become my servant!"

"Y-Your whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

I shouted as loud as I possibly could. I just know I was making a (° Д °) face. What's she talking about? Her "servant"? Are those even a thing in this day and age? And even if they are, who says something like that to a guy they just met? This doesn't make sense! Something must be wrong with my hearing; it's the only explanation. Right, time to book myself an appointment with an otolaryngologist…as friggin' if!

"Wh-What do you mean, your servant…?"

"Being a mage's servant means being their partner! Though, really, the mage is waaay above the servant, position-wise. Long story short, I'm telling you to be my SLAVE!"

“YOUR *SLAVE*?!”

“And just so you know, you have no right to refuse the offer!” Eris declared, making a (□∀□) face.

Dammit, she’s so cute! I might not mind being a slave if a girl as cute as her is my owner…wait, no! I can’t let her sell me on this that easily! But then again…as long as she knows my secret, I can’t exactly refuse her… Ahh, damnations! All I wanted was to live a perfectly ordinary, unremarkable high school life! Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?!

Okay, wow, that’s definitely *a light novel!* Light novel stories come in all shapes and sizes, of course, and I don’t mean to lump them all together or anything, but Sayumi’s story absolutely *exuded* the purest essence of light novel writing. It was such a light novel, it was giving me an overpowering sense of déjà vu. It followed the light novel template so by the letter, it might as well have *been* the template!

If that was Sayumi’s idea of a story that seems somehow light novel-ish, then it was kind of incredible that her concept of light novel-ish was that highly developed. She was as omnitalented as ever. A jack of all trades, master of all.

I looked back to her manuscript. Apparently, the blackmail material that the heroine was holding over the protagonist’s head was his past case of chuunibyou. After she finds out about his cringey history, he’s left with no option other than to do what she says.

Dammit! Why the hell didn’t you get rid of that notebook, past me?! You wouldn’t be having any of these problems if you’d just tossed the stupid thing!

“Hmm? Let’s see here,” muttered Eris as she flipped through the book.

I guess that’s how the heroine learned about his past: by finding the old notebook in which he’d written all his chuuni delusions. *Hmm. Something about this story is hitting awfully close to home.*

“Actually, first, I’ve gotta ask. Why’d you call it the ‘*Bloody Bible*,’ anyway?”

“Ugh, gaaahhhhhh!” Good question! What were you thinking, past me?! What the hell is ‘Bloody Bible’ even supposed to mean?! It’s nonsense!

Hmm?

Eris smirked at me. “And the name of your supernatural power is ‘*Dark and Dark,*’ huh? Oooh, wooow! That’s *sooo* cool, isn’t it?”

Gyaaah, the shame, it burns! Why in the name of all that's decent did I feel the need to put two darks in there, anyway?!

"And I see your titles are The Lord of Thanatos, The Knock on Hell's Door, The Umbral Tempest, Dynamis Energeia, The Solitary Assassin…pff, ha ha ha! You sure have a lot of 'em, don't you?"

Kill me! Or at least let me kill myself! If I had a Walther handy, I'd put a round through my own skull in an instant! If I had a cyanide pill, I'd swallow it without a second thought! Why did you have to think up titles for yourself like that, past me?! Don't you realize how excruciatingly cringey it is?!

Waaait a second.

"And your catchphrase is 'Now, let us begin the end of the beginning'? Uhh…sorry, I don't get it. What's that supposed to mean?"

Ha ha haaa, believe me, I wish I knew. "Begin the end of the beginning"? I'm sorry, what?! Who could possibly be a big enough chuuni edgelord to think up a catchphrase like—oh, wait, that's right.

"It was meeeeeeeee!"

"This is meeeeeeeee!" Miraculously, my lines in and out of the story were almost identical! "What the hell, Sayumi?! This is obviously me, isn't it?!"

"Oh? And what could you mean by that? I don't recall ever identifying my protagonist as you! You should be careful—mixing up fiction and reality is a mistake that has ruined many a life in the past!" said Sayumi, her deadpan utterly unshakable.

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“B-But, the *Bloody Bible*’s the name of *my* notebook, and all those titles were names *I* came up with! Not to mention *Dark and Dark*!”

“A series of exceptional coincidences, I’m sure. I hope you realize, Andou, that when you go around accusing anything and everything of being a rip-off at the drop of a hat, you’re only exposing how poorly read you are?”

“Wh-What?!”

“Having a former chuuni as a protagonist and a heroine who uses that fact to drag him into all sorts of misadventures is just about as stock as a premise could get! Frankly, I’m offended that you’d accuse me of ripping you off over something that surface-level.”

“Okay, you have a point there…b-but—”

“More to the point, you take pride in your chuunibyou, don’t you?”

“*Pride*…? I mean, I definitely take pride in my individuality and refuse to bow to the pressures of society at large, but that’s—”

“In that case, you could hardly be more unlike my protagonist! Why are you so upset about this? The more you rant and rage at us, the more I’m inclined to suspect that deep down, you really *are* secretly ashamed of your own behavior.”

“G-Grr…” She’d backed me into a corner. I was furious that she’d managed to talk circles around me, but I also couldn’t come up with an argument to refute her point. She had the oratory skills of a practiced attorney, and in the face of her unshakable argument, I found myself wondering if maybe I was in the wrong after all.

And maybe she did have a point—maybe she *was* right. Even if I was the model for her main character, that didn’t change the fact that fiction is fiction. It wasn’t anything to get worked up about. Or at least, it shouldn’t have been…

Ugggh…

Why did I think any of that crap was cool? I wanted to travel back in time and murder the old me who wasted his life away thinking up stupid titles and edgy power names. I can’t *believe* I used to spend hours posing and practicing catchphrases in front of a mirror…

To make matters worse, I was so convinced that all of that nonsense was cool, I unabashedly showed it off to my clubmates. God, I can’t believe what a pathetic little cringelord I was…

…but it was just *so* hard not to see her protagonist as a future version of me, somehow.

N-No, I don’t! I can’t! I take pride in my way of life! No matter how many eons come and go, there shall never be an age in which I forsake that pride and cower in shame at my own doings!

“I’ll never go back on my word! That’s my chuuni way!”

“And what village’s Hokage are *you* trying to be?” jabbed Tomoyo.

“Even after I turn twenty—even after I turn *thirty*—I’ll never change! I’ll stay just the same as I am now, all the way to the bitter end!”

“Andou,” said Sayumi after a brief moment of hesitation, “that really isn’t funny.”

Yeah. Fair point. It really isn’t.

Maybe it all started with my name, Andou Jurai. It’s kind of an unusual one, and that might’ve set me off down the wrong track… Just *thinking* about my so-called true name, Guiltia Sin Jurai, sends a chill down my spine.

“Okay, come *on*, he has my friggin’ name and everything!”

“Oh, my! What a coincidence.”

“Like hell it is!”

“Well, to be completely honest, I *did* intend the protagonist being you to be my story’s punch line,” Sayumi casually admitted. Looking a little closer, she had one of those obnoxiously self-satisfied grins plastered across her face.

I was pretty much exhausted at that point, but I read on regardless, only to find that Sayumi had run up against the time limit soon after that point. Her story concluded with the words “Our adventure has only just begun—The End.” Of course, not reaching any sort of even remotely conclusive ending after the first volume is pretty light novel-ish in its own right.

“Guess that just leaves Tomoyo,” I said, turning to look at our last contender.

“Ah, right. Uhh…” stammered Tomoyo, glancing around shiftily. “The thing is…I didn’t actually write one.”

“Huh? Like, you didn’t write *anything*?”

Tomoyo nodded hesitantly. “I, umm… I guess I just couldn’t come up with anything this time. Ha ha ha!” She turned to Sayumi and gave her an apologetic little bow. “Sorry about this! It was a really fun idea, honestly!”

“Please, don’t worry about it. I only suggested the activity in the first place because I thought it would be enjoyable, not because I wanted to oblige anyone to participate.”

And so, Tomoyo’s turn ended before it could even begin, and with it, our light-novel-themed creative activity came to a close. Sayumi collected the stories we’d all written and stored them away in a file for safekeeping. None of them were exactly masterpieces fit to pass down through the generations, but they were worth keeping around as mementos, at least. Tomoyo’s wasn’t included in the file, of course, on account of it not existing.

As we watched Sayumi stow the manuscripts away, I glanced over at Tomoyo. She looked a little bit depressed, somehow—enough so that I resolved to have a conversation with her when I had the chance.

Hatoko practically skipped over to me the moment our club came to a close. “Heeey, Juu, let’s walk home together!”

She was scheduled to come over to my house that afternoon, so going home together was sort of a given. Or, at least, it would’ve been, if I didn’t have other ideas.

“Sorry, Hatoko, but you should head over to my place before me. My sister oughta be home by now, so the door should be unlocked. And even if it isn’t, the spare’s still hidden in the usual place.”

“Huh? But why?” asked Hatoko, cocking her head. “Let’s walk together!”

“I’ve gotta talk to Tomoyo before I leave, though.”

“With Tomoyo?”

I nodded. I’d already laid the groundwork for our chat by asking her to stay behind after our club finished up.

“Whatcha talking about with her?”

“Nothing important, and it won’t take super long. *Somebody* has to keep my sister entertained, though, so if you could head over before me, that’d be great.”

“Hmmm. If it won’t take long, why can’t I just wait for you? Oh, or is this a conversation I’m not supposed to hear?”

I’m sure the question was well-intentioned on her part, but I hesitated for a moment, struggling to figure out how I should answer. *What do I say? If I tell her I want to be alone with Tomoyo, she might assume I’m going to ask her out, but I’d feel sorta bad about saying that it’s none of her business.* A few seconds of pondering later, I found my answer.

“You just wouldn’t understand, that’s all. I’m sure it’d be boring to sit around and listen to us, so heading out early’s for your own good.”

For a moment, Hatoko just stared blankly at me, but her usual smile returned just a second later. “Okay. Got it. I’ll see you when you get home, then!”

Chapter 5: Time——Sin

When we were in middle school, Juu lent me a book from a particular…genre, I guess? Books like it are called ‘light novels,’ anyway.

He’d been lending me manga and magazines for quite a while before that point. Juu had always loved explaining the things he was interested in to me, and he tried as hard as he possibly could to get me to understand them. Unfortunately, though, I didn’t really *get* it a lot of the time. Most of the time. Pretty much all of the time, actually.

I know this might sound self-deprecating, but I’m not the sort of person who likes thinking super deeply about stuff like that. When I read manga, I tend to just breeze through it. After I finish, I usually think “oh, that was good” and then forget what the story was even about before long.

Doing that with a manga Juu lent me meant trouble, though. He’d always ask me *why* I thought it was good, and I never had an answer because the story had gone in one ear and out the other. And I don’t see a problem with that, personally! For me, those stories are just a way to kill time. He got super upset when I tried to explain that to him, though.

We’ve always had totally different tastes in manga, really. I liked reading girly, bittersweet romances, and Juu loved battle manga above all else. It was no surprise that the light novel he more or less forced on me wasn’t to my taste either.

It was full of made-up technical terms, its plot was convoluted, and forcing myself to work through it was a chore. I’d read pages on end before realizing that I hadn’t actually absorbed any of the stuff I’d been reading. My eyes were just gliding over the words, and none of them had actually registered. He lent it to me near the beginning of spring break, and I still hadn’t managed to bring myself to finish it by the end. It would be the first time I’d ever returned a book to him without reading the whole thing first.

I gave it back to him on the first morning of our second year of middle school, while we were walking to school together. I was so nervous. I thought he might get mad at me again, but that time, I was prepared to talk back. I was all set to tell him that some people just like different things! Not *everyone* values the same stuff that he does, for crying out loud!

In the end, though, all the arguments I’d prepared went unsaid. The way he smiled at me when I gave him the book back blew them all right out of my mind.

“Oh. Gotcha…” he said. There was something almost tragic to his expression, and at the same time, it felt like he was giving up on something, or like he was accepting something. It was a smile of resignation. He didn’t blame me or try to make me understand what made him like the book so much. He just quietly let it go.

“I sorta figured you wouldn’t understand… Meh, that’s just how it goes.” A moment later, his smile was as cheerful as ever, and he’d moved on to the next topic.

The matter was closed in his mind, but I was still preoccupied. He “sorta figured” I wouldn’t get it? “That’s just how it goes?” What did *that* mean?

It didn’t take me long to figure it out: Juu had given up on me ever understanding him. He’d resigned himself to that idea, abandoned hope, and accepted things as they were. He’d determined that I would *never* understand him, and he decided to abandon me—though, of course, that’s a pretty nasty way of putting it on my part.

Honestly, it was probably a sign that he’d managed to grow up a little. He’d realized that his preferences weren’t everything, and that some people wouldn’t enjoy the things he loved. It’s common sense, sure, but it takes some people longer than others to get to that point, and him reaching it was probably a good thing.

But that didn’t change the fact that I felt abandoned. I couldn’t help but feel that way.

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We had that conversation on the first day of our second year in middle school, and ever since then, he hasn't loaned me a single book. I wasn't about to offer him any of mine, of course, so our little book exchange came to an informal but permanent end.

Our friendship didn't end up fading away along with it, but from that day onward, Juu stopped trying to force me into trying things like he'd done with that novel. You'd think that would be a welcome change, but for some reason, I've never been even the slightest bit happy about it.

☆

"A foolish vagrant on an endless journey, footfalls resounding unto eternity!"

"A miserable criminal, burning all to ash with the fearsome flames of madness!"

Two souls, man and woman, stood side by side, their voices entwining, resonating, and resounding in tone and meaning alike.

"Garb stained scarlet by open wounds innumerable!"

"Bound by a web of chains; shackled by sin!"

The chosen ones of time and flame wagered their very existences upon a singular prayer: a fervent wish to meld two shapeless, formless powers…into one!

"With each passing second…"

"…a new transgression!"

"Closed Clock x Dark and Dark: Time is Sin!"

"Why the *hell* am I playing along with this crap?!"

One minute, I was standing back to back with Tomoyo, our hands entwined and thrust out before us, intoxicated with the sheer, unmitigated awesomeness of our combined powers, and the next, I was caught off guard by her high-pitched shout.

Our hands, incidentally, would've been pointed towards our sworn enemy…*if* we'd actually had one of those, which we didn't, so instead, we'd gone with the big mirror that we kept off to the side of our club room. Thanks to that excellent decision, we got to witness every moment of our combo move, and for the record, we'd absolutely *killed* it. Combo moves: *hella* cool.

"What sort of pathetic turn has my life taken to force me to stay after school and play make-believe with *you*, of all people?! And what the hell is '*Time is Sin*' supposed to mean, anyway?!" Tomoyo yelled indignantly.

"It's the name of our Unison Skill!" I explained. "When two individuals with profound faith in each other's abilities work together in perfect synchrony, they can combine the traits of their supernatural powers and give birth to a new, unified ability! The most important part's recognizing your partner's potential—the rest comes naturally."

“Feels like you pulled that straight out of a manga, and one aimed at little kids, to top it off… And besides, what would *our* powers even do together? I can’t picture it at all.”

I know, right? Hatoko and Chifuyu’s combined powersets were as straightforward as could be, but the rest of our powers were esoteric enough that they really didn’t lend themselves to Unison Skills easily. I’d come up with plenty of names, at least, so that was something.

“*Time is Sin*—a mysterious power indeed. And if you want to know how it works…you’ll have to watch the spin-off film, coming soon to theaters near you!”

“Way to put profits above narrative!” jabbed Tomoyo. We’d sort of missed the natural opportunity to let go of each other’s hands, but she finally released me at that point. “And anyway, my hand…” she muttered.

“Huh? What about your hand? Oh, was mine sweaty? Man, don’t just *tell* people that sorta thing straight up! You could be a little more casual about it, at least.”

“No, never mind! It’s nothing. Stupid chuuni loser!” She scowled and shook her head with the sort of exasperation that shows that you’re *really* done with someone’s crap.

“Hey, who’re you calling a chuuni loser?! You weren’t exactly complaining about it when we were actually doing the pose!”

Tomoyo jumped with shock. She’d waited until *after* we’d totally finished our little performance to give me crap about the whole Unison Skill thing. You could claim that she was just playing along to make her inevitable retort land harder, but I had a more compelling theory.

“Tell the truth. You wanted to give it a try, didn’t you?”

“Wha… N-No, I…”

“You recited the lines I gave you word for word, you *nailed* the pose without a hitch, and splitting the last line between the two of us was *your* idea!”

“Ugggh…”

“This’ll be a lot easier on you if you just fess up, you know?” I said, lowering my tone of voice and speaking in as calm and gentle a manner as I could manage. I was in the mood to play the villain and try out a deceptive smooth-talking routine.

Tomoyo glanced nervously down at the floor, then slowly began to speak. “Well…I might’ve sorta, just a little—and I mean *just* a little—wanted to try it out… I mean, like, fusion skills and ability combos are just so exciting, somehow…”

“I *know*, right! I had faith, Tomoyo! I just knew you’d understand!”

“B-But, that doesn’t mean I wanted to do it *that* badly! You were just acting so obsessed, and I didn’t want to let you down, so I played along, that’s all!” she screamed, blushing vividly. “D-Don’t get the wrong idea, here! This was all for *you*, got it?!”

Wait, was that a tsundere line or not? Feels like it fell into a weird middle-ground.

"Gaaah, screw this! I'm going home!"

"Your planet needs you?"

"I'm going *home*, to my *house*, like a normal person!" Tomoyo snatched her bag off the table and stormed off toward the door.

"Hey, wait! I still have something to talk about!"

"Oh, for the… What, *another* Unison Skill?"

"Nah, that was just an impulse. That's not what I asked you to stay for at all, actually." I shrugged. *Probably should've started with the important part.* "Do I really seem like the sort of jerk who'd keep you behind after club for something like *that*?"

Tomoyo paused to think for a moment. "Sorry. You totally do."

Yeah, okay, I guess that would *be totally in character for me. Fair point.* "Nah, the *actual* reason I asked you to stay has to do with the activity we did today."

Tomoyo's expression very obviously stiffened up. "Wh-What about it…? Yeah, I know, being the only one in the group to not write anything was kinda crappy, but *you* definitely don't have the right to criticize me."

"I wasn't *gonna* criticize you, okay? I just wanted to know why."

"Why…? I already told you. I couldn't come up with—"

"I mean, I think I can guess most of it. Sayumi went and picked light novels as the theme, and you're trying to be a light novelist—in theory, anyway—so you were probably thinking that you *had* to come up with something better than the rest of us and wow the whole club. Then that put a ton of pressure on you, and thanks to *that*, you ended up not being able to write as well as you wanted to. Or, y'know, something along those lines. Right?"

"Ugh!" Tomoyo's eyes widened for a moment before she clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. It wasn't very hard to guess what she was thinking.

In short, the reason why she hadn't managed to write anything was her own sense of obstinate pride. It's the same sort of state of mind that a not particularly passionate member of the soccer club would get into after their gym teacher called them out to show off some dribbling tricks to the class…I assume. You'd *have* to nail it and show off to everyone, and you couldn't make a fool of yourself, no matter what. That sort of mindset can really mess with you, psychologically speaking, and in Tomoyo's case, it definitely held her back.

"H-How'd you know…?" she timidly asked.

"It's obvious. I mean, in a manner of speaking, it's my fault to begin with."

There was, after all, one major difference between our hypothetical soccer player and Tomoyo's circumstances: everyone in the soccer player's class would know that they were in the soccer club. Not so for Tomoyo,

though. She hadn't told any of her clubmates about her ambitions so far. Only one of us—me—had caught a glimpse of them.

"Sheesh," I sighed. "You're such a show-off, you know that? Or what, did you think I'd be all 'Ooh, the wannabe novelist is writing a light novel for us? She'd better come up with somethin' *real* good, then, gweh heh heh'?"

"I didn't think you'd be *that* much of a dick about it… But, well, when I thought about how you'd be reading whatever I wrote, I just couldn't bring myself to get anything down," Tomoyo admitted, glancing away awkwardly.

She'd effectively set up a series of tall hurdles for herself, then charged right into them without even trying to jump. Even more so, since—and I know this might sound bad—*I* hadn't actually had any real expectations for her work to begin with. Hell, considering the time limit was only an hour long, I don't think *any* author could've churned out a masterpiece under the same conditions.

"Plus, my writing just hasn't been going well lately," Tomoyo continued. "It's like I've hit a wall with the story I've been working on…"

"Huh. So you're in a slump?"

"No. It's not a slump. I'm just not a good enough writer yet," she asserted. I could tell she wasn't going to budge on that particular point. "I really hate the idea of deciding that *I'm* in a slump. It feels like that'd be putting my own lack of ability up on a pedestal, and I don't wanna use that sort of thing as an excuse. If other people say it about me, then whatever, I guess, but I won't do it for myself."

"Hmm? But aren't there plenty of people who really *do* get into slumps for all sorts of things? Nobody can be totally on point *all* the time."

"I still think it's different when you say it about yourself. Being in a slump isn't something you can just brush off as being a given. It's humiliating."

Hmmm. I couldn't quite disagree. I'd seen people use "being in a slump" as a transparently obvious excuse plenty of times, and it *was* always sorta obnoxious to watch. It makes you want to ask if they really think they're good enough at whatever they're doing to call it a *slump*. If you can talk about it that lightly, then in the end, it's probably not a real slump at all.

All that said, though, I couldn't help but think that she was going way too far out of her way to get in the pro mindset. Even ignoring the part where she was too self-conscious to write anything that I might read, she was taking her responsibilities as an aspiring author *way* too seriously. She wasn't even a pro yet, so wasn't forcing herself into the pro mentality like that majorly jumping the gun? I'd be lying if I said I didn't think she was being sort of ridiculous, but on the other hand, and to a *much* greater extent, I found myself thinking that it was really cool of her.

"This might just be the first time I've ever felt genuine respect for another person," I declared with an intrepid grin. *Talk about an awesome line, right? That's the sort of statement you'd expect from the captain of the*

prefectural champions' team in a sports manga! Tomoyo rolled her eyes and made a "here we go again" face, but I decided to ignore that.

"So, then—want some advice on how to get out of your slump?" I asked. Tomoyo's eyes widened with surprise again, and my grin followed suit. "It's not a problem if *you're* not the one saying it, right? And anyway, I'm just curious about what you're writing at this point. What's it about? Where are you stuck?"

I wasn't just being nice. I was asking out of genuine curiosity. If Tomoyo was working *that* hard on her story, I wanted to know what it was like. She hesitated for a moment longer, then finally reached into her bag.

It turned out that the source of Tomoyo's writer's block was her inability to decide on names for her main characters.

Yeah. The characters' names. Seriously. From an author's perspective, that's the sort of detail it's really easy to get hung up on, but from the reader's perspective, it's honestly pretty whatever. Or maybe that's just me?

On the other hand, there were authors out there who'd made their uniquely eccentric methods of naming their characters into an actual selling point for their works, so maybe fussing over those details wasn't such a bad idea after all. It just felt like she was putting the cart before the horse, I guess.

"I'm writing, like, a high school drama sorta deal right now, but I just can't find something to name the protagonist that feels quite *right*, somehow… I've got a bunch of ideas, though."

Tomoyo somewhat reluctantly showed me a list of character profiles. They were really rough—just names for the two main characters and a couple lines of description for each of them.

"W-Well, what do you think?" she asked, her voice laden with nervous tension. I, on the other hand, was breaking out in a cold sweat. I could *feel* the color drain from my face as I read.

-Amaterasu Yamato
The protagonist. Male. A second-year high schooler, and a perfectly ordinary student in every possible way.

Sort of a fancy name for a perfectly ordinary high schooler, don't you think?! That's how many mythological allusions, exactly?! That name is way too much for the main character of a youth drama! Hell, it might even be too much for a supernatural battle story! I can cope with some pretty over-the-top names, don't get me wrong, but this is a step too far even by my standards!

"W-Well? Don't just stand there, say something," said Tomoyo. She had the most painfully earnest look on her face, and I had *no* clue what to do.

Oh, jeez, she's serious, isn't she? This isn't a bit—she actually wants my opinion on that nightmare of a name! "I-I mean, let's not be hasty here! Give me a sec to check out the heroine's name."

I looked down below our hero Amaterasu Yamato's block, where the next main character's profile was written.

-Tsukuyomi Ayami

The main heroine. Female. A second-year high schooler, and a mysterious beauty who transfers into the protagonist's class out of nowhere.

Oof, now this one's conflicting. Her name sounds pretty cool, sure, but is Tomoyo really planning on naming the main heroine of a high school drama Tsukuyomi, of all things? If I saw that on the back cover of a book, I wouldn't exactly be rushing to the cash registers with it. And wait a second—the protagonist's Amaterasu and the heroine's Tsukuyomi?

"Hey, Tomoyo, are you planning on introducing a character named Susanoo at some point? Probably an old man, or something?"

"H-How'd you know?!"

Oh, I know. Do I ever know. I mean, this is me we're talking about! How could I not be aware that Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo are the three supremes upon which Japanese mythology is founded? (That's how you count supreme deities, incidentally—one supreme, two supremes, etc.) How could I not understand that their cool-factor is very literally godly?

Those three names together were enough to spark awe in any reader, no matter how jaded. Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo: *hella* cool. Hella cool indeed…but even the most masterfully crafted of blades is nothing more than a blunt instrument if its wielder isn't up to snuff, if you take my meaning.

"H-Hey, Tomoyo? These two aren't, like, related or anything, right? They're total strangers, not from different branch families of a secretive clan that controls the nation from behind the scenes? So, isn't it sort of weird for their surnames to all be part of the same overarching theme?" I asked, doing my utmost to present my criticism in as gentle and roundabout a method as possible.

"Huh? But theme names like that show up all the time in fiction, don't they? It's just a writing convenience, it's totally normal," fired back Tomoyo, calm and rational to a fault. "The bit that I'm not sure about's whether to call him 'Amaterasu Yamato' or 'Yamato Amaterasu.'"

She's been stressing about that, of all things?!

"Like, Yamato just feels like such a surname, right? But having Amaterasu as his given name just feels, I dunno, a little much?"

You're on totally the wrong track, Tomoyo! The problem is much, much more fundamental than you're giving it credit for! Look at this name from a more macro perspective, please! Your protagonist's name is like the current

state of the Japanese political system: it needs wide, sweeping, and drastic reform if there's to be any hope of the situation improving!

I wanted to point all of that stuff out *so* badly, but one look at Tomoyo's face was enough to shut me up. It was an expression of single-mindedness, embarrassment, anxiety, and the desperate desire to be praised, all rolled up into one big bundle of elevated expectations.

"Hey, Andou? Which do you think would be better?"

"G-Good question... Personally, I'd say Yamato Amaterasu's the way to go." It struck me as the ever so slightly less terrible option, anyway. Better to break that theme up, if at all possible.

"You think...? Ah, but doesn't Yamato just feel more, I dunno, *interesting* as a given name? Like, more original, I guess? Plus..."

She just kept talking. Oh, god, I see what's going on here. This is one of those situations where she secretly already has her answer in mind, and was only asking me for the sake of validation. In other words, the single most obnoxious sort of question to answer!

What should I do?! Tomoyo's never been this much of a pain in the rear to deal with before! She's supposed to be the one who actually has common sense, and picks all of our stupidity apart!

I paused to take a few deep breaths, working up the resolve to do what had to be done. "Tomoyo," I began, repeating an internal mantra of *I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away!* "I hate to say it...but this name's just *way* too chuuni."

Tomoyo let out a strangled gasp and recoiled in shock. She staggered backwards, tottered on her feet like she was about to swoon, then actually *did* crumple to the ground in a heap.

"Y-You okay?" I nervously asked.

"This must be what it feels like to have a literal pile of human waste tell you that you stink..."

And just what exactly is that supposed to mean?

"I can't believe that you, *you*, of all people, actually told me that I was being 'too chuuni'..."

"Believe me, I didn't see this coming either." My comment had been a double-edged sword. I'd damaged myself just as much as I had Tomoyo.

I finally understood how she'd felt whenever I went overboard in her presence. As a former chuuni, she could understand my motives perfectly, and that probably just made it all the more unpleasant to watch me do my thing. *Man, humans really do have a way of getting set on how amazing their own perspective is and never considering other people's viewpoints, don't they?*

"So, y'know... I get that I'm in no position to say this, but you really haven't gotten over your chuuni phase after all, have you?" I asked.

"Y-Yes, I have! I'm totally over it! Made a complete recovery! Don't lump me in with you!" shouted Tomoyo. She was *not* in a joking mood. "Unlike *you*, I'm through with that crap! It doesn't feel excruciating to have people

look at me when I'm out in public at all anymore! It's just that, writing's sort of its own special thing…and, like, in the end, I really do like that sorta chuuni aesthetic…"

"Huh. You couldn't stand having people look at you when you were in middle school?"

"St-Stop nitpicking!" Tomoyo glared at me, tears of frustration pooling in the corners of her eyes. "And anyway, like you can talk! I bet people cringed you half to death when you were a middle schooler!"

She was probably just bluffing, and her theory was a shot in the dark, but I still found myself at a loss for words.

"When I was in middle school, I… I'd rather not talk about it," I finally muttered. More specifically, I didn't want to talk about my experience in the eighth grade. That was a story that didn't bear telling. "I guess you could call that a low point in my life. I don't even wanna *think* about it."

"It was bad enough to make *you* look back on it and cringe? Just what the hell happened?" For a moment, Tomoyo looked horrified, her face pale and her voice trembling. A second later, though, she furrowed her brow. "Huh? Wait a second… When you were in middle school, didn't you…?"

"Hmm? What? Didn't I what?"

"Ah… Umm, n-never mind, it's nothing." Tomoyo broke eye contact and dodged the question.

Huh. That was weird. Tomoyo went to a totally different middle school than I did, so by all rights, she shouldn't have known anything at all about my middle school era. In any case, things had gotten way too awkward on the whole for us to keep the conversation going any further, so we reached a silent but mutual understanding that our respective middle school experiences were off the table from that point on. It was time to move things back to the topic at hand: her writing.

"Okay, Tomoyo, I get the picture. You have a thing for going to excessively fancy extremes, and that means I have the perfect advice for you."

I got up on the highest horse I could imagine and prepared to dispense my wisdom to a former chuuni who desperately needed it.

"Sometimes leaving things deliberately dull is the best way to sharpen them!"

I delivered it with as much dramatic emphasis as I could manage, making it sound like some real words of wisdom. Now *that* was sure to get through to her! As to what precisely I meant by "dull" and "sharp"…meh, interpret that as you will. I'm sure you get the picture.

"Huh…? What's that supposed to mean?" asked Tomoyo.

"It means that if you go too overboard fretting over the little details, your work will suffer on the whole as a result. It's sorta like how fashion works! Think about it—a person who wears nothing but brand-name clothes

looks way less fashionable than someone who has just one brand-name item that's *super* on point, right? Well, names and backstories are the same way."

Tomoy was just silently listening at that point, so I kept going. "Chuuni stuff too. If you go out of your way to hold back just a little, that can make the chuuni appeal of the final product stand out way more than it would've if you'd gone all out!"

She was...well, not exactly moved by my theory, that's for sure. She *was* definitely taking it into serious consideration, though, so that was something. It wasn't long before the thoughtful look on her face melted away into something a lot closer to a sulk, though. *Guess I'm not someone she wanted to get this sort of lecture from.*

"Hmph," Tomoyo snorted. "And where do *you* get off talking down to me like that? As if you haven't been on a nonstop chuuni rampage ever since we first met."

Yup, very true! Dreaming all that stuff up is just so much fun, I can't help myself from running wild. That said, Tomoyo's and my cases were different on a very important level: I only thought up ridiculous names and backstories for fun. They were for my personal enjoyment, and nothing more. Tomoyo, on the other hand, was aiming way higher than I ever had. If she wanted to venture into the world of professional storytelling, she couldn't write for her own self-satisfaction alone.

"Hey, Tomoyo, don't you think this would all be easier if you just told everyone, already?" I suggested.

I'd gone on that whole super cool ramble a while back about how *anybody* can cheer their friends on, but after seeing just how serious she was about her ambitions, I couldn't help but want to cheer her on anyway. That meant that at the very least, I had to take my role as her cheerleader seriously. I couldn't just tell her to go for it and call it a day—I had to try and *help*.

"Getting other people's perspectives on your work is super useful, don't you think? And the more people's opinions you have, the better."

"I...know, yeah," she agreed. "But going out of my way to make a whole *thing* out of telling them's sort of a different can of worms, right? Imagine if I gathered everyone up just to say, 'Listen up, everybody! I'm trying to be a light novel author!' I'd look like a total moron."

"I guess."

When she put it that way, it *was* a surprisingly tough topic to broach. Declaring that you're trying to become an author puts you one false move away from looking like one of those "Oh, yeah, I'm *totally* writing a novel, and that makes me *awesome*" people, or at least an "I can't handle working at a real company" person.

"I'll tell them when I get the chance. Though, really, I think the coolest way to do it would be to wait until *after* I've produced some real results,"

said Tomoyo with an ever so slightly self-deprecating chuckle.

By the time I'd finished trying to convince Tomoyo that no, Amaterasu Yamato probably *wasn't* the way to go after all, it was fairly late in the afternoon. I ended up heading home a lot later than I'd planned on. When I finally arrived, I found Hatoko's shoes waiting for me in the entryway.

"I'm home!" I called out.

"Oh, Juu! Welcome back!" Hatoko's voice rang out from the kitchen. I headed in that direction and found her dressed in an apron and cooking up a storm. I recognized the apron—it was her favorite one, which meant that she'd made a stop at her house before coming over to mine.

"You sure were out late, huh?" said Hatoko.

"Yeah, we ended up talking about a bunch of stuff in the end."

"What sort of stuff?"

"Y'know. A bunch."

"A bunch, huh? Hmm."

"Where's my sister?"

"In her room! She said she's super busy with a report that's due tomorrow and that I should call for her when dinner's ready."

Oh, that jerkwad! Can't believe she's working Hatoko like this. It's like she thinks Hatoko's actually her little sister or something!

"Anything I can help with?" I offered.

"Hmm... No, I'm okay! It's almost ready, so you can just take it easy."

I couldn't really argue with that, so I wandered into the living room to lounge around on our couch until she was done. I knew I'd just get in the way if I insisted on helping, so it was better to just sit tight for the moment.

While I waited, I watched Hatoko work her magic in our kitchen. She was humming a happy little cooking song, and she seemed to be really enjoying herself. It was sorta calming to watch.

It's not like she'd been over to cook at my house all that often—I could probably count the number of times it had happened on my fingers—but somehow, in spite of that, something about the scene felt perfectly natural. If I didn't know better, I'd think she came over to cook for us on a daily basis. I think part of it might've been that to me, Hatoko herself was a constant presence in my daily life.

As I watched my childhood friend cook, I found my mind wandering back to Tomoyo—or, more accurately, to Amaterasu Yamato. No matter how I looked at it, there was just no way an actual person would *ever* have a name like that...though really, "Yamato" itself was perfectly inoffensive in isolation. It was only when paired with the absurdly extravagant "Amaterasu" that all of the historical and mythological connotations for the name were called to mind, and I had to give her credit for that synergy.

It might be too much for a person's name, but maybe it would work pretty nicely as a power name? Like, Yamato Amaterasu and Yamato Nadeshiko could be a paired power set? Maybe it'd work for the male and

female leads of a story? Hmm... Or maybe not, I dunno. It sorta feels like it'd work, but it also feels sorta lacking. Might as well jot it down, though. I pulled my Bloody Bible out from my bag and began inscribing a new passage into its blasphemous annals.

"Hmm? Hey, Juu, whatcha doing with your Vivre over there?" called Hatoko from the kitchen.

"It's not a Vivre, it's the *Bloody Bible*!" I snapped back. The fact that she abbreviated the name on top of getting it wrong made it so much worse.

"Did you come up with a new idea?"

"Mwa ha ha! You might say that. Really, now, my powers of imagination are fearsome indeed!"

"Oooh? That's great! What sorta idea was it this time?" Hatoko casually asked. She hadn't stopped cooking, even as she carried on this little conversation with me.

I, however, wasn't multitasking nearly as well, and I had already distracted myself by thinking up other power names that would slot nicely into the Yamato series. "Mmh, y'know, buncha stuff," I replied offhandedly.

Normally, that's where the conversation would've ended. Since Hatoko couldn't understand my superlative sense of aesthetics, she didn't tend to dig that deeply when I was in that sort of mood.

That day, however, was different.

"Oh, c'mooon! What's the harm? Just tell me!" Hatoko obstinately insisted. Okay, maybe calling it obstinate was going a bit far, but at the very least, she was being a lot more persistent than usual. And of all the reactions I could've possibly gone with, I just *had* to get irritated with her.

"No way," I retorted. "There's no point telling you about it."

And then I said it. The worst thing I possibly could have. The most awful, despicable thing imaginable. A line that I would come to regret for the rest of my life.

"You wouldn't understand, anyway."

I heard a dull thud from the kitchen. It sounded like something had fallen, and I stopped scribbling in my notebook for long enough to glance over. Hatoko's ladle was rolling across the floor—she must've dropped it.

"Whoa, what're you doing? You okay in there?" I asked, but she didn't turn to look at me. She didn't bend over to pick up the ladle, either. Really, she didn't react at all. She just stood there stock still, except for an ever so slight tremble, like her soul had departed from her body.

"Hey...Hatoko...?"

"I don't..."

"Huh?"

"I *don't* understand!"

Then Hatoko *snapped*.

Month: △ Day: □

Today, Juu told me all about Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanoo. Why are all their names like that? They're all so long, hard to remember, and don't make sense. I have to try my best to memorize them, though!

All the words that Juu makes up are really hard to handle, but the ones that show up in dictionaries or on the internet are a little bit easier. I can review those on my own, so it's not too tough to memorize them in the end! Those seven deadly sins he taught me about the other day? I know all of them by heart now!

I wonder if Juu will be happy if I can remember all the words he teaches me?

Maybe?

There's one problem, though. I might be able to memorize all of them, but no matter what I do, I just can't understand why they're supposed to be so cool. Juu told me all about the roots of the name "Amaterasu" and why that makes it so awesome, but none of it made any sense to me.

I don't understand what's so good about it. I don't understand what makes it cool at all.

I don't understand.

I don't understand, Juu...

—Excerpt from Hatoko's middle school diary

Chapter 6: Childhood——Friends

"What's so great about stuff being *bloody*?! I don't *care* if you say it in English, it's still *blood*! I *hate* blood! If you're covered in blood, it doesn't mean you're cool, it means you're *hurt*! And what's so cool about madness?! Why would anyone *want* to be crazy?! *I* sure don't! There's nothing good about it! I don't *understand*! And what about *sinful*, huh?! Why would that be a *good* thing?! And what, *irredeemable* sin's supposed to be even better? If sinful people are cool, then does that mean all the criminals of the world are cool too?! And what's 'chaos' supposed to mean, anyway? Do you actually mean it *literally*? Then what's the point, even?! Why does everything always have to be *black* this and *white* that? Being in monochrome doesn't make things cool, it makes them *boring*! I like *colorful* stuff! I like pink, and green, and yellow! How's red any different from *crimson*? How's blue any different from *azure*? This isn't art class! Just use normal words! What do you mean, *darkness*?! What's so special about it? You like it when it's dark out? You think gloomy days are *cool*? And why do you have to have a *dark side*?! There's no *way* having one of those would be anything other than awful! You know that having multiple personalities is a mental disorder, right?! Same with savant syndrome—it's not a *superpower*, it's a *condition* that people *struggle* with! Why would you *want* that?! Do you realize how hard it must be to live with?! And why would you *want* to have homicidal impulses?! You can't get by without killing people? That's supposed to be amazing, somehow? Well, it's not! There's nothing *cool* about killing people! Of *course* there isn't! If you have to pick between good and evil, why do you *always* have to go with evil?! That's not the right choice! Isn't it *obvious*?! Why would *evil* be *good*? Evil is *evil*! What's so cool about your arm throbbing? You *like* how it feels when you can't hold your own power back? That doesn't make you look cool, it makes you look *stupid*! People who *can* control themselves are the cool ones! *They're* praiseworthy! And what's so incredible about hiding your true power?! That just means you're being lazy! *Cool* people put their all into everything they do! *Cool* people *try*! You think having white hair and red eyes is *stylish*? It's not! It's *creepy*! Only *rabbits* have eyes like that! Slaughter? Calamity? Devastation? Vicious? Malevolent? Hollow? Terminal? Why do you *always* go *so* far out of your way to use all these stupid, scary words?! Are you trying to curse someone, or what?! There are plenty of *nice* words out there; use *those* instead! Why do you have to give *titles* to everyone and everything? Having a ton of nicknames just makes things confusing! *Especially* when they're all random English gibberish! How am I supposed to *remember* those?! And same for true names—what does that even *mean*?! What does giving yourself a *true* name actually do for you?! Stop saying *requiem* when you could just say song! Stop saying *taboo* when you could just say bad! Stop saying *jihad* when you could just say war, and stop saying war when you

could just say fight! ‘Deathstruction’ *isn’t* a clever play on words! Nobody *cares* if ‘slaughter’ is ‘laughter’ with an s! Using ‘awesome’ with its old definition *doesn’t* make you sound smart! Don’t just read some article about Greek mythology and talk my ear off about it! Same for Norse mythology, and Japanese, and the Bible! You think the names in them are cool? That’s *it*?! I won’t understand if you can’t actually tell me what any of them mean! What sort of gods *are* Amaterasu and Tsukuyomi?! What did Zeus and Odin actually *do* in their stories?! So Lucifer was an archangel before he became a fallen angel—*and*?! Is the ‘fallen’ part cool? Is that *it*?! If you’re gonna teach me about this stuff, then actually *teach* me about it! And I mean the whole picture, not just the weapons that show up in them! There’s *nothing* fun about hearing about those! I have *no idea* what Gungnir or Longinus or Excalibur or Durandal or Ame-no-Murakumo-no-Tsurugi are, and I don’t *care*! I don’t understand what’s so cool about them at *all*! And that goes for all the other random terms you use too! You go on and on about original sin, and the ten commandments, and Genesis, and Revelations, and Armageddon, and then you’re all ‘Aren’t their names great?’ What does that *mean*?! How can you tell if something’s cool from its *name*?! And then you tell me I ‘just have to get a feel for it’? Well, I *can’t*! Dumb stuff still looks dumb to me, no matter *how* many times I see it! And besides, I’ve never been interested in myths and religious texts and stuff in the first place! Even the *animals* in them are all creepy! Cerberus, Ouroboros, Yamata no Orochi, Fenrir, phoenixes—they’re all just *weird*! I like *normal* animals! Cute ones! I like puppies and kittens! Just because you did a little research online about the theory of relativity, or Schrödinger’s cat, or universal gravitation, or *whatever* doesn’t mean you’re some kind of expert! If you don’t even know what you’re talking about, there’s no *way* I’m gonna understand your explanation! It’ll just give me a headache! Stop quoting Nietzsche and Goethe at me! I don’t even know who they *are*, so their quotes don’t mean *anything* to me! I won’t understand what you’re trying to say at *all*! Talk to me in *your* words! Please, for *once*, just say *something* I can understand! What is chuuni? What does chuuni *mean*? I don’t understand! I don’t understand I don’t understand I don’t understand

I just stood there, my mouth hanging wide open. I had no idea what had happened. I didn't know if I should be angry, or sad, or something else entirely. My thoughts were moving so sluggishly, I wished I could use *Accel Brain* and force them to pick up the pace.

Whatever the hell kind of plot twist that was, I *definitely* wasn't laughing about it.

"H-Hatoko...? Hatoko!"

A few seconds later, my thought process finally caught up with reality, and I jumped up from the couch. Chasing after her was the only move I could think of, and it felt like something I *had* to do. I found her shoes in the entryway, but I'd also heard the door open and shut a moment before, which could only mean...

"She ran out in her slippers? Seriously?!" *Was she really* that *upset? But why...? Was it my fault?* Considering everything that had happened, there was absolutely no doubt that I was the cause of the problem. Pathetically enough, though, I couldn't even begin to understand what exactly I'd done wrong. "Dammit! What the hell set her off...?"

I was upset enough that part of me wanted to just sit down and cry, but before I got the chance, something slammed into the back of my skull with enough force to send me flying into the front door. Head-first, of course. As I tried to clutch the front *and* back of my head simultaneously in a futile attempt to dull the throbbing pain, I looked down at my feet to see an encyclopedia on the ground. There was only one person who'd assault me with a blunt instrument from behind like that.

"Oh, you little asshole," growled my sister. "The hell'd you do to Hatoko? She just ran outside, *crying*!"

My sister's room was on the second floor, and her window gave her a clear view of the street outside our house. She must've heard Hatoko yelling —or her footsteps, or maybe the sound of the door slamming—and watched her run outside. *Hatoko was crying?* I'd thought I'd seen tears in her eyes as she sprinted out of the kitchen, and it seemed I hadn't just been imagining them.

"You'd *better* hope I'm wrong about this," said my sister, her voice trembling with rage. "You didn't t-try anything *funny* with her, did you?"

"Like hell I'd ever do that, moron!" I snapped back.

"*Huh*? *Who's* a moron, punk?!" Before I knew it, she'd grabbed me by the back of the head and was grinding my face into the door. And her grip strength was *stupidly* strong to boot. I could feel my skull creaking under the pressure. "If anyone here's a moron, I'd say it's the guy who just made a girl cry!"

I couldn't argue with that, and I fell silent. She squeezed me for a moment longer, then suddenly let go.

"Go after her," my sister snapped in a tone that made it very clear this was *not* a request. "And don't bother coming home until you've found her! Scumbags who make girls cry aren't allowed across the Andou threshold!"

“Hah… You know I can’t leave without crossing the threshold, right?” I quipped, opening the door without even bothering to look back at her. *Go after Hatoko? I don’t need you to tell me that!*

“Oh, right, my phone! I should just call her!”

The obvious finally struck me *after* I’d already sprinted around checking out all the places where I thought Hatoko might decide to go to, all the places I thought she might reflexively run off to, *and* all the places I thought she might try hiding in. A solid two hours had passed by fruitlessly since my search began. I finally came to a stop in a back alley that split off from the nearby shopping district, gasping for breath as I cursed myself for forgetting all about the wonders of modern technology.

“This is the first thing I should’ve tried, dammit,” I muttered, but then a thought struck me. Had I just been careless? Or was I, on some subconscious level, trying to show off again? Did I want to make it look like I’d stumbled across her effortlessly, like back in elementary school when I found her hiding by that staircase?

The truth of that incident, of course, was that when I realized that Hatoko wasn’t among the students who’d evacuated into the courtyard, I flew into a panic and charged around checking everywhere I could think of before I finally found her. Did I want to do that again this time? To tell her that figuring out where she’d hide was a piece of cake for me, acting the way I imagined a super cool protagonist of some novel would toward *his* childhood friend?

And if that *was* what I was trying to do, then what the *hell*?! *This is no time to be acting cool!*

“Son of a *bitch*,” I spat, then I fished my phone out of my pocket and dialed Hatoko’s number. I wasn’t at all convinced she’d actually pick up, considering the state she was in the last time I’d seen her, but I could at least *try* giving her a call. It was a gamble, but it was the best I had to go on.

I waited as the phone rang, praying feverishly for her to pick up, and then—a click.

“Hatoko?!”

“Nope. Sorry, no Hatokos here. It’s just little ol’ me,” a boy’s voice said in reply. I’d know that insufferably flippant tone any day of the week.

“Is this…Sagami?”

“Bingo! Sagamin, aka Sagami Shizumu, speaking.”

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?!”

“Not much. Just walking around, hoping I’ll get lucky and find a little girl who’s also a vampire and needs to ingest my baby batter periodically to stay alive. Why do you ask?”

“…Sorry, but I *really* don’t have the patience to put up with your stupid sex jokes right now.”

“You *do* sound like you’re in a real fix. Fair enough, then! I’ll go into serious mode.”

Did I just make Sagami *go serious with a single sentence?* The panic and impatience I was feeling must’ve really come through in my voice.

“So, why do you have Hatoko’s phone?” I asked. “Is she with you?”

“Nope. I did bump into her a minute ago, though. Like, literally. She was running around in an apron and slippers, and I’m pretty sure she wasn’t looking where she was going at all. Anyway, she dropped her phone, I picked it up for her, and that’s all she wrote.”

In other words, Hatoko was currently without her phone, meaning that I had absolutely no way of contacting her. *Gah, damnations! Of all the rotten luck!*

“Hey, did something happen, Andou? The whole full-on sprint in slippers thing isn’t exactly what I’d call normal behavior for her.”

I couldn’t answer Sagami’s question. I still wasn’t totally sure what had happened myself. The reasons behind Hatoko’s sudden fury and equally sudden flight were completely opaque to me, so the best I could do was brush him off.

“No clue. She just totally snapped out of nowhere and took off.”

“Ahh, gotcha. Figured it’d be something along those lines,” replied Sagami. In spite of my answer being as vague as it could’ve been, he’d apparently read into it pretty deeply. In fact, it almost sounded like he understood the situation even better than I did.

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?!” I snapped.

“Means just what it sounded like. That’s pretty much exactly what I expected to happen, that’s all. This probably feels like some sorta huge plot twist to you, Andou, but I saw it coming a mile away.”

He saw this *situation coming? And a mile away?* “That doesn’t make any goddamn sense, Sagami! I’m gonna hang up if you keep messing with me!”

“It doesn’t make any sense, huh? I’d bet that’s exactly how Hatoko felt, don’t you think?” said Sagami. “You and I have known each other for a while, Andou. I’ve seen a lot of you ever since we started high school—well, I guess we met in middle school, technically—but, point is, I’ve been watching you for a solid year or two, and I’ve seen you and Hatoko together plenty of times. I’m gonna be blunt: the thing you two have going grosses me the hell out.”

“It grosses you out?” Hatoko and I do? Or rather, our relationship does?

“Well, yeah. I mean, c’mon—you two are such a bad fit for each other it’s almost hilarious, right? I have literally *no* idea why you even hang out together.”

I fell silent, and a moment later, Sagami continued. “Y’know how you like to say that we’ve got different tastes, but we’re on the same wavelength? Well, I’m not so sure I agree with that, but if we’re operating under that theory, then I’d say that you and Hatoko don’t share tastes *or* a wavelength. Why do you guys even *like* being around each other?”

“Why…?” I mean, we just do! We might not share tastes or a wavelength, but we’re still friends. We’ve been together forever, and we’ve always gotten along just fine.

“I bet you think the two of you get along, but if you do, it’s all thanks to Hatoko. She’s been acting the part so well, you probably never even noticed. But that sort of act doesn’t come free. I bet it’s been pretty darn stressful for her, don’t you think? She’s done an awful lot of worrying about how your personalities clash—I’d put money on it.”

“Wait, wait…what’re you saying, Sagami? What do you mean, she’s been *worried* and *stressed*? Hatoko doesn’t get—”

“Whoa there, Andou! Don’t go mixing up fiction and reality on me, here!” said Sagami, sounding sort of exasperated. He was, incidentally, the last person I wanted to hear that particular piece of advice from. “She doesn’t get stressed? *Nobody* never gets stressed. She’s not one of my beloved waifus. She’s an obnoxious, pain-in-the-ass real-world girl.”

Sagami didn’t seem especially worked up or dismissive about any of this. He was talking in the same dispassionate tone as ever, but in spite of his indifference, his words resonated to a painful degree.

Juu, I never, ever understand a single word you ever say to me!

That incredibly long scream, so long I thought it would go on for eternity, rang out once more in my mind.

“I guess you could say I’ve got a bystander’s perspective of you guys. There are some things you can only see from that sorta outside vantage point. Not so for the other folks in the literary club, though. They’ve probably never thought your whole thing is gross at all. They *want* to believe that your relationship’s a good thing, and that overpowers any other feelings they might have about it…though they might still feel a little uncomfortable, at least. Anyway, if I had to sum it all up nice and simple: you pushed your chuuni act too far, and you burned out all of Hatoko’s good will. That’s all it boils down to, really.”

“You think…? Is that really what happened?”

“Who can say? Ah, just for the record, all this stuff I’ve been telling you? *Totally* baseless. I’m not making a theory, or even a guess, really. This is all just my gut reaction.”

It was the most irresponsible thing he could’ve possibly said after a speech like that, but I didn’t get upset with him. I was actually grateful for his apathy, for once. That’s not to say I didn’t get mad at all, though. I was plenty mad—at myself.

“Sagami,” I said, “where’d you bump into Hatoko?”

“’Bout halfway between the school and the station, in front of that one convenience store.”

“Got it. Ah…meh, can’t hurt to ask. Feel like helping me look for her?”

“What? No way. I’m spending the afternoon in the arcade playing the *Precure* card machines, so that’s not happening.”

Yeah, figured as much. “Well, thanks for everything.”

“Don’t worry ’bout it. That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Yeah, and you’re the best friend a guy could ask for.”

☆

As the sun slowly sank beyond the horizon, I tottered along a riverside path, exhausted from all the running I’d just done. It was only then that I realized my first big mistake: I’d ran out still wearing the pair of slippers I put on when I went into Juu’s house. Their soles were way less thick than my usual outdoor shoes, and my feet were starting to hurt really badly. To make things worse, I’d somehow managed to lose one of them during my mad dash. The remaining slipper was a mess, totally covered in dirt and mud.

“And wait, these are Juu’s family’s slippers! Oh, no, what should I do…? I’ll have to pay them back.”

My second mistake struck me soon after: I was also still wearing my apron. I was more than a little embarrassed about being outside dressed like that, I’ll tell you that much!

“Then again…it *is* sort of cold out today, so this might work out nicely. The days have been getting longer lately, but it’ll still be dark soon… Actually, wait, what time *is* it?”

I stuck my hand in my pocket and immediately discovered yet another big screw-up: my phone was gone. I checked all my other pockets, but it was nowhere to be found. I could only assume that I’d dropped it somewhere.

Maybe it was when I ran into Sagami? Oh, speaking of which, I never apologized to him for that! I’ll have to say I’m sorry the next time I see him.

As I stood there in silence, my fourth and final mistake slowly sunk in: the things that I’d gone and said to Juu. I had plenty of feelings about what I’d done, and regret and self-loathing were definitely mixed in there, but if I had to put how I felt into a single, perfectly precise expression, well, it’s like I’d just said: I’d made a mistake.

“I’ve really done it now,” I mumbled to myself. You hear about people letting it all out—really letting someone *have* it—and then feeling satisfied afterward, but I wasn’t getting any satisfaction at all. All I could think was how deeply I wished I hadn’t said any of it.

I’d cried myself out as well as I could by then, though, and I was finally starting to feel a little more clear-headed. I could think about it from a more detached perspective and ask myself why I’d gone and said a thing like that as if it were someone else’s problem.

“I wonder if it was that business with Kudou-san that set me off?” I speculated. When I witnessed her ask Juu out the other day, my mind had gone completely blank. I realized it was all a misunderstanding a moment later, and that was a relief…but at the same time, I was suddenly scared.

I’d always been with Juu. We’d always, always been together. But that didn’t necessarily mean we’d always *stay* together. That fact was starting to

feel a little more real to me, and it was all thanks to Kudou—or maybe I should say it was all her fault?

"Oh, but that's not quite right, is it? All that stuff with Chifuyu and Tomoyo was way more of a shock, if anything," I muttered. Not that anyone was around to hear me. I was just letting my thoughts spill from my mouth.

Juu and I had been together for so long it almost felt like we were family, but I still didn't really understand him at all. I understood his whole "chuuni" thing even less. No matter how many times it was explained to me, I could never even begin to grasp the concept. Tomoyo and Sayumi understood what chuuni meant, though. Even Chifuyu was starting to understand, from the look of things, though just a little.

I was the only one. I was the only one who couldn't understand. I'd been with him forever, and he'd explained it to me time and time again, but no matter how long I'd known him—no matter how many explanations he'd given me—I didn't understand.

"I wonder what Juu and Tomoyo were talking about? Why'd they have to be alone for it?"

They were probably just discussing something I wouldn't understand, of course. I bet they had a blast, like they always did.

"Huh...? Wait, huh?" I'd been walking along for quite some time, consumed by my worries, but an important question had only just hit me: where *was* I?

I quickly glanced around, taking stock of my surroundings, but I couldn't make out so much as a single familiar landmark. Walking along the riverside path had seemed like the natural thing to do, but on taking a closer look, I realized I'd never walked on that particular path before at all. I'd been so lost in my distress as I ran that all of a sudden, I was lost in a much more literal sense. I must have wandered all the way to one of the neighboring towns.

"O-Oh, wow. I'm kind of impressed with myself!" Maybe that wasn't the time for it, but I couldn't help but pat myself on the back. I must've been running really fast, all things considered! Thinking back on it, Juu *did* compliment me once on how I'm "so athletic it's almost a waste," didn't he? I *think* that was a compliment, anyway. Of course, that brought my mind right back to a certain childhood friend of mine.

"Juu..."

I sighed as I was suddenly hit by a wave of loneliness and helplessness. I wanted to go home, but at the same time, I didn't want to go home at all. I wanted to see him, but I had no idea what sort of attitude I was supposed to take if I actually did. I was an absolute mess of conflicting emotions. *Though, actually, realistically speaking, I can't go home whether I want to or not!* I had virtually no memory of the path I'd taken to get here, so retracing my footsteps was out of the question.

"Ugh, I've really done it now..." I sighed to myself.

“Ugh, I’ve really done it now…” sighed another voice in perfect harmony with mine.

I bolted upright and turned to find a young man sitting on the embankment just a little ways down the path. He looked like he was probably in his early twenties, and he was slumped over, clutching his head. The evening breeze ruffled the grass around him, but judging by the look on his face, he was too busy brooding over something to even notice. Then, a moment later, he looked right at me.

“Ah, umm, g-good evening,” I said with a quick, polite nod. The man wordlessly returned the gesture. It just felt like the natural thing to do when someone makes eye contact with you, somehow. Though, speaking precisely, we only made partial eye contact, on account of his right eye being covered up by an eyepatch. It was one of those white ones—the medical sort that they give you when you go to the hospital for an eye infection, or something.

“Evening, little lady. Are you a high…schooler?” asked the man. The odd, awkward pause at the end could probably be explained by how strangely I was dressed: a high school uniform, an apron, a single slipper, and socks made for quite the peculiar ensemble. *Jeez, yeah. I have to admit, walking around like this really is embarrassing.*

“Yes, I am,” I replied.

“Thought so! Man, high school…takes me back,” said the man in a tone laced with deep emotion. “Lately, I’ve been catching myself wishing I could go back to those days. Running around like a dumbass, doing whatever stupid crap I feel like… ’Course, when I really think about it, I had plenty of worries back then too. Just different ones, y’know? Like the ones you’re dealing with right now.”

“Does that mean you’re worried about something?” I asked.

“Yeah, y’know. Life’s nothing but a series of one problem after another, I’m telling you.”

The man gestured at the ground beside him and raised an eyebrow at me, inviting me to sit down. I took him up on his invitation without really thinking about it. I was tired out from all that running and felt like resting my legs, anyway.

“So, what’s your name, little lady?” the man asked nonchalantly.

People love to tell me how friendly I am, but not even *I’d* give out my name to a man I’d just met, under normal circumstances. At that particular moment, though, I was in a mood I could only describe as something close to hopeless desperation, and all those reservations were the last thing on my mind.

“My name’s Kushikawa Hatoko. That’s Kushikawa, written with the characters for ‘comb’ and ‘river’—*not* the yakitori sort of kushikawa—and Hatoko, written with the characters for ‘dove’ and ‘child,’” I answered, politely explaining my name down to the characters that made it up. “What’s yours?”

I was only really asking for politeness's sake, but the man cracked an ecstatic grin the moment the words left my mouth. Then he laughed—a dry, remarkably distinctive laugh. Something like a "bwa ha ha," if I had to spell it out. He almost looked like he'd been waiting for that moment, and he declared his name with a triumphant smile.

"My name is Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First…though in *this* world, I've taken on the alias Kiryuu Hajime."

"…"

I guess he must be foreign?

Chapter 7: Fallen——Angel

I quickly reached the conclusion that Kiryuu, the man who I'd happened to meet, had probably been born somewhere outside of Japan. That would explain his unusually long name—"Kiryuu Hajime" was probably a name he'd taken in an effort to naturalize himself to his new, foreign environment. I'm pretty good at figuring these things out when I put my mind to it! I also hadn't managed to memorize the long version of his name at all, so I decided to just call him Kiryuu for the moment.

"Does that eyepatch you're wearing have something to do with what you're worried about?" I asked on a whim.

"Yeah…" replied Kiryuu, followed by a nod and a weary sigh. "Forbidden powers are forbidden for a reason; I overused one, and the burden it placed on my body gradually built up over time. It's not so bad, as things stand, but if things continue in this direction, this eye of mine may very well be sealed away from the blessings of light…forever."

"Oh, I see! You mean you have eye strain."

"E-Eye strain…? No—well, I mean, that's not…*exactly* wrong, I suppose…?"

"I know just the thing for eye strain! It helps if you lay a cold, damp washcloth over your eyes, swap it out with a hot one, and keep swapping them every couple of minutes. It improves the circulation in the tiny little blood vessels in your eyes!"

I had just the right piece of information for the situation ready in my bag of useful trivia, but Kiryuu still looked a little skeptical. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. I wondered what it could be for a moment, but a quick glance answered that question easily enough: the words "Suzuki Ophthalmology" printed at the top made it pretty clear it was a receipt from a local clinic.

"Gah! N-No, it's not what you think! This isn't mine, I got it from a friend!" shouted Kiryuu as he noticed the direction of my gaze. He quickly shoved the receipt back into his pocket.

"Is your eye in bad enough shape that you had to go to the hospital?" I asked, a little more concerned now.

"N-No… Modern medicine could hardly provide solace to this accursed… Ah, I mean… Oh, to hell with it. Yeah, that's right. I screwed up big time. I guess leaving it in for three days was pushing my luck…" he mumbled, then paused again to heave another sigh. "Lemme ask you a hypothetical: if your doctor told you that your eyes just aren't suited for contacts and that you should stop wearing them—*especially* considering your eyes aren't actually bad, and you're just using color contacts for the sake of fashion—what would you do?"

I cocked my head. "I'd stop wearing them, I guess."

“Yeah…figures.” Kiryuu’s shoulders slumped with disappointment. “But c’mon, though… The crimson eye’s part of my identity! I’ve wished I had heterochromia for *so* long, you have *no* idea… But if even my doctor’s telling me to stop, maybe I’ve got no choice… Makes my eye swell up and hurt like hell, anyway…”

Kiryuu looked like he really was feeling extremely troubled. I still hadn’t totally figured out what exactly he was troubled *about*, but I *had* managed to piece together the impression that it was something surprisingly petty.

“You think that’s a pretty petty thing to be all worked up about, don’t you?” said Kiryuu, shooting me a sharp glare. I gulped.

“N-No, not at all! I was actually thinking about how serious and profound a problem it must be!” I stammered, shaking my head frantically.

“Doesn’t matter to me if you do,” said Kiryuu with an apathetic shrug. “That’s just how humans are. As far as we’re concerned, someone else’s problem will never be more than just that: someone else’s problem. If it’s not your issue, it’s always gonna look petty, and if it *is* your issue, it’s always gonna feel like the most important thing in the world. The weird thing, though, is that in spite of that, people always have a way of butting into each others’ troubles and making them their own.”

Umm…what? Where is this coming from?

Kiryuu ignored the vacant look on my face and kept talking, apparently more to himself than to me. “People fear ostracism above all else. But that doesn’t mean that they’re all right with just blending in with the crowd either. They have a driving impulse to be different; to be *special*, even as they wish to fit in with everyone around them. That contradiction lingers and festers in the backs of their unconscious minds, and they remain blissfully unaware of it as they live out their sad little social-animal lives. *That*…is human nature.”

“Umm.” I hadn’t understood what he was trying to say to begin with, but I was *really* lost now. My confusion must’ve shown on my face, because Kiryuu glanced over at me and cleared his throat.

“In short,” he said, “people desire to be unique—to be the one and only—but they also have a tendency to forget that fact and fall under the misapprehension that everyone else is just like them. And thus, discord is born. The vast majority of interpersonal problems in modern society arise from that social friction.”

Friction. Everything else that he’d said had gone totally over my head, but that one word really resonated with me. *Is that friction what I’ve been feeling this whole time?*

“They just don’t get it. Nobody does!” declared Kiryuu. “Humans are all different—every individual is a unique organism! It’s just so stupid how they try to lump everyone together under one big umbrella called ‘humanity’!”

I was still just listening along silently, but suddenly, he spun to face me. The gaze of his single uncovered jet-black eye met mine. “Now then, little lady—are you the sort of person who finds it relieving to hear that your

problems are so banal and petty, they're hardly worth concerning yourself over? Or are you the sort of person who'd be shocked by the revelation? Regardless, I'm about to make all of your worries vanish like dust in the wind."

And then he did just that.

☆

"Hello? That you, Andou? Why're you calling this late?"

"Has Hatoko shown up at your place, Tomoyo?"

"Hatoko? Huh? No, she hasn't... Why, what's up?"

"Got it. Sorry to bother you."

"H-Hey, wait a second! Seriously, what's going on?! Did something happen?!"

"Hatoko's missing, that's all."

"She's *what*?! The hell do you mean, 'that's all'?! And what do you *mean*, miss—"

I hung up. The odds of Hatoko being at Tomoyo's house had been virtually nonexistent to begin with. Tomoyo lived far enough away that she would've had to have taken a train to get there, and I knew for a fact that Hatoko didn't have her wallet with her since she'd left it—and the bag she kept it in—behind when she ran out of my place. She didn't have any means of reaching Tomoyo's, even if she'd wanted to.

Well, except walking, that is. It wasn't totally impossible that she'd decided to go all the way there on foot, which is why I gave Tomoyo a call, but apparently, it hadn't been worth the effort. I'd contacted Sayumi and Chifuyu as well, but I'd had no luck with them either. I'd gone on to run through pretty much the whole list of friends that Hatoko seemed likely to rely on at a time like this, but nobody I contacted provided even a single lead.

"Guess I'm at a standstill..."

As I leaned against a nearby utility pole, a wave of exhaustion washed over me. I slowly slid down it, crouching down on the asphalt. My complete and utter lack of regular exercise was suddenly coming back to haunt me.

"Yeah, okay, I get it... If I wanna save the world, I probably should've spent less time thinking up names for my attacks and more time, like, running and doing push-ups and crap." *Hindsight's always 20/20, isn't it?*

I was starting to think that my only reasonable option would be to go home and wait for her to get in touch with me. For all I knew, I just had to give her another hour and she'd show up again at my place on her own. Some of Hatoko's friends had told me just that when I called them up. They all talked about how "It's fine, Hatoko's not a kid" and "It's only been three hours since she 'went missing,' right? It doesn't count as going missing until a little more time than *that's* gone by." Some of them were definitely snickering at me, much as they tried to hide it.

I couldn't afford to be that optimistic, though. I had a bad feeling. Her whole screamlike speech still echoed in my mind without cease. The more

time passed by, the deeper my heart sank into dread. I was afraid that if I didn't do *something*, Hatoko would just vanish away, never to return. That sense of impatience and ever-looming crisis, and not to mention my own sense of duty, pushed me back to my feet.

"If I'm at a standstill…then I guess I just have to start moving again."

I set off at a run.

Run! Nay, fly!

Fly, Melos!

"Ugaaaugh…"

After who knows how long spent sprinting wildly around town, I finally burned the last drops of my energy reserves and executed an extravagantly comedic faceplant. My one consolation was that I'd had the good fortune to eat it on a dirt path that ran alongside the riverbank rather than on cold, hard pavement. I didn't have to worry about getting pasted by a passing car, for one thing, not to mention that it was a lot less painful that way. I still tore up my jacket and pants, though, and I skinned up my palms and knees pretty badly.

"Dammit... Can't even stand up again," I growled. I'd pushed myself *way* past my limits, and my HP gauge was sitting at a perfectly round 0%. "Where the hell *is* she…?"

If I've searched this hard for this long and still haven't found a single trace of her, then that means... For a second, the absolute worst-case scenario flashed through my mind. No! Calm down. Just calm down, and stay that way. You're spiraling—stop overthinking this.

She could've fallen asleep somewhere, or she could've bumped into a friend. For all I knew, she was happily chatting it up with them at that very moment. And yet, somehow…somehow, I couldn't quell the tumult unsettling my heart.

"Oh... I get it now," I mumbled to myself. After spending a few minutes lying on my back and thinking about that mysterious sense of unease, I finally sussed out its source: this was a first for me. It was the first time I'd ever found myself without Hatoko at my side. *That's* what had thrown me into such a panic.

I wasn't usually around her twenty four hours a day, of course—childhood friends or not, we weren't *that* extreme, and I think that goes without saying—but I *had* been convinced up until that moment that no matter what happened, Hatoko would always be my ally. I thought she'd always be like family to me. And so, in the face of complete, unilateral rejection, I found myself terrified that maybe she'd never come back to my side again.

"…Gotta get moving." I mustered up the nonexistent reserves of power I'd kept stashed away and forced myself to stand. I'd be right back on the ground the instant I lost focus, but still, I stepped forward…

"Andou!"

…only to be stopped again by a very familiar voice. I looked up, rubbed my eyes, and found Tomoyo and Sayumi running towards me.

“You guys… What’re you doing here?”

“We’re here because we got worried after that phone call! No duh!” shouted Tomoyo.

Actually, what I meant was “How’d you know I was here, in this place in specific,” but… Oooh, I get it. It took me a moment, but then it hit me that I was right on the shortest route from my house to Tomoyo’s. Anyway, I wasn’t sure whether coming to find me was Tomoyo’s idea or Sayumi’s, but I already had a pretty good idea *why* they were here.

“You guys came ’cause you’re worried about Hatoko, right?”

“Not just her,” replied Sayumi. “We were also worried about you. Really, just look at you,” she grumbled indignantly as she laid a hand on my shoulder. Thanks to *Route of Origin*, that was all it took to restore me and my clothes to their former, undamaged state. “Chifuyu won’t be coming, by the way. We could hardly drag an elementary schooler out into the streets at this time of night, no matter the circumstances.”

“Hey, you okay, Andou…?” asked Tomoyo with no small amount of worry to her tone.

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod. I wasn’t even remotely okay, in truth, but I at least tried to act the part. “Shouldn’t have left Fenrir behind—that was a major blunder. If only he were here, I wouldn’t have burned myself out that badly.”

“Uhh…‘Fenrir’?” Tomoyo asked, raising an eyebrow.

“My most reliable means of travel, and my predestined partner! In this world, I believe his kind are known as ‘bicycles,’ or something to that effect.”

“Of *course* you named your bike… That’s so baby’s-first-chuuni-stunt, I don’t even feel like digging into it.”

I was honestly really grateful that the two of them had shown up. I needed all the help I could get. “Okay,” I said, ready to start delegating as I walked off. “I’ll search over that way. The two of you should—”

And then I fell over. My injuries had all been totally healed, but my stamina? Not so much, apparently.

“Oof, jeez… Are you *sure* you’re okay, Andou? You’re, uhh…really not looking great,” Tomoyo nervously observed.

“Lay off… I’m fine,” I grumbled, forcing myself to my feet and preparing to set off again.

“W-Wait a second!” shouted Tomoyo, grabbing me by the shoulder. It wasn’t exactly hard for her to hold me back. “Seriously, what’s going on? We have *no* clue why Hatoko disappeared, or why you’re freaking out like this! Explain yourself, already!”

She looked me right in the eye, her gaze so earnest it was almost painful. I could tell I wasn’t getting out of this, which meant I wasn’t going

anywhere any time soon. I sat—or collapsed, really—back down onto the ground.

"Y'know, sometimes a person with good intentions but no clue can do a lot more damage than someone who intentionally goes out of their way to do harm..." I mumbled. If I were putting it nicely, I'd say that I was talking to myself, but really, it was more of a bitter complaint to the world at large, fueled by despair and self-loathing.

"There's nothing worse than a guy who *thinks* he's doing the right thing for the people around him, when really, he's just doing whatever the hell he wants to," I carried on. "It's like people who offer to sing a duet with the one person in the karaoke booth who really just doesn't want to sing at all, or people who offer to help you with your homework even though you didn't ask, just because they want to show off how smart they are. Or parents and relatives who go on long-winded speeches about their kids, thinking that it'll somehow make them look good..." I was so ashamed of myself, so utterly disgraced, that all I could do was stare at the ground. "Or...like people who try to force their hobbies onto their friends..."

Sayumi and Tomoyo listened quietly as I continued to explain myself.

"I used to recommend stuff that I liked to Hatoko, like, all the time. Manga, light novels, that sort of stuff. And I didn't just recommend them either—I'd tell her all about my theories, my headcanons, the powers and titles I'd thought up... You name it, I probably talked her ear off about it. It was a nasty case of chuunibyou at work," I added, for once deliberately using the term as the pejorative it was. "I thought they were all the coolest things in the world, and I wanted her to think they were cool too. I wanted her to be able to enjoy them in the same way I did. Really...that's all I wanted..."

There wasn't so much as a scrap of ill will motivating my actions. I had nothing but good intentions, but unfortunately, well-intentioned mistakes are the hardest ones to deal with.

"I wonder if I've been bothering Hatoko this whole time. Has she been pushing herself for my sake, even though deep down inside, she thought I was annoying...?" My eyes felt hot and damp. It was taking everything I had to keep myself from crying, and I looked even further away from Tomoyo and Sayumi, just to make sure they wouldn't notice if I ended up losing that battle. "I thought she could just brush off anything I said, like it was nothing...but I was wrong."

Her scream still resounded in my mind, again and again. Her tirade had been peppered with all sorts of special words and terms that I'd taught her over the years.

"She's been working so hard to try and see eye to eye with me...harder than I ever realized. And what did *I* ever do for *her*?"

We were like a shirt that had been buttoned up the wrong way—talking past each other for as long as we'd known each other—and I never even noticed. Years upon years had passed by without me ever realizing the

fundamental flaw in our relationship, much less making any effort to correct it.

"Has being with me…been painful for Hatoko, this whole time…?"

"Oh, shut *up*, you stupid little wuss!"

Tomoyo slapped me in the face, hard. She didn't use *Closed Clock* this time. It was a perfectly ordinary slap, without any extra power or supernatural assistance behind it, but in spite of that, it felt almost absurdly heavy as it landed on my cheek. You don't put that sort of force behind a slap unless you really mean it—or at the very least, you don't use it for the sake of our usual slapstick violence.

I was already sitting down, and Tomoyo's blow knocked me flat on my back. My cheek stung like hell, and I was so shocked that I couldn't even react. She'd slapped the tears right out of my eyes.

"Quit moaning and groaning already! It's pathetic!" shouted Tomoyo, laying into me verbally as I lay sprawled out before her. "You think being around you's *painful* for Hatoko?! As friggin' if!"

That finally shocked me out of my stupor. I looked up, and found Tomoyo glaring daggers down at me.

"When has Hatoko ever *not* looked like she's having fun?! Have you *seen* the way she smiles when she's around you?! You two get along so well, it makes me sick! There's no way in hell I believe she's been faking it this whole time!"

"The thing you two have going grosses me the hell out."

Sagami had made it very clear how he saw Hatoko and I, but there Tomoyo was, telling me that the way she saw us couldn't have been any more different. I had no way of knowing which one of them was correct. It was even possible that neither of them were entirely wrong. But as to which of them I *wanted* to believe—which of their words I wanted to cling to like my life depended on them…well, that goes without saying, doesn't it?

"Hatoko's important to you, isn't she?! You care for her enough to run yourself into a broken-down mess, don't you?! Then try *believing* in her, dammit! Hatoko doesn't hate you! She *never* would!" Tomoyo ranted on and on, lecturing me with the intensity of a raging inferno. The words she spat were brutally harsh, and yet at the same time profoundly kind. "You don't get to decide how Hatoko feels! Don't go getting all depressed over a stupid *guess*, you coward! I never wanna see you sniffling and waffling like a stupid little sad sack ever again!"

And then Tomoyo crouched down in front of me. She raised a fist and brought it to my chest—this time as a tap, not a full-on punch—and grinned mischievously.

"So pull yourself together! You're Guiltia Sin Jurai, aren't you?"

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“...Mwa ha ha!”

I laughed. All I could do was laugh—nay, *cachinnate*—with all the might I could muster! Tomoyo had picked the most encouraging line she could’ve possibly come up with. There was nary a phrase in this world that could have lifted my spirits more!

“Hmph. And who, pray tell, was sniffling? Surely you aren’t implying that I, he who is scorned and despised far and wide as Category Error: The Man No Longer Human, would ever betray so much of a hint of human emotion?”

I placed my hands on my knees and pushed myself upright, unleashing another fearless mwa-ha-ha as I rose. My gaze met Tomoyo’s, and just as she grinned...

“You’ll have to excuse me for raining on your parade.”

...my legs buckled. Sayumi, who’d circled around behind me at some point when I wasn’t paying attention, had taken me out at the knees. In my stamina-starved state, a dignified fall was out of the question, and I face-planted right back onto the ground. Again. *Oh, come on, I* just *managed to pick myself up, in more ways than one! Just how many times am I gonna have to fall over tonight?!*

“We have yet to resolve any of the problems we currently face,” said Sayumi. “To begin with, we still have no information whatsoever regarding Hatoko’s whereabouts. If you searched for her long enough to put you in *that* state, Andou, then even with Tomoyo and I helping, a blind manhunt is highly unlikely to bear fruit.”

“Right... Do you think we should contact the police, then?” suggested Tomoyo.

Sayumi shook her head. “No, I don’t imagine they would take us seriously. A high school girl going missing would certainly merit their involvement after a matter of days, perhaps, but it hasn’t even been five hours since Hatoko vanished.”

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense...”

“Staying patient and waiting *would* be our best move. However...” Sayumi paused to look down at her feet, where I was still doing my damnedest to stand up again. “Considering that a member of our team seems incapable of restraining himself, I believe that is out of the question.”

“You’re damn right it is,” I agreed, finally succeeding in forcing myself upright again.

“I respect your dedication,” said Sayumi, “and I assure you, I want to find Hatoko as quickly as possible as well. That said, I don’t believe that searching blindly will get us anywhere...”

The conversation trailed off as Sayumi and Tomoyo both frowned, falling deep into thought. I fell alongside them, racking my mind with a newfound sense of clarity. *What should we do? Think. Think!*

“If only one of us had ended up with clairvoyance as their power, or something...” grumbled Tomoyo.

“I’m afraid that wishful thinking won’t accomplish anything,” Sayumi quietly replied.

She was right, unfortunately. None of the powers we possessed were suitable for finding a missing person. Godlike in their respective fields though they were, not one of them was capable of something so simple as finding a single—*Wait!*

I gasped. *Powers. Our powers?* “Mwa ha ha…mwaaa ha ha ha ha haaa!”

I burst into laughter. The other two were gaping in astonishment at me, but I just couldn’t help myself. If *this* wasn’t laugh-worthy, then *nothing* was.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha! To think I overlooked such an extraordinarily obvious solution!”

Of course we have a means! Not some master plan or an ace up our sleeves, though. No, the best method available to us is exceedingly simple. A perfectly run of the mill, utterly hackneyed plot development that’s precisely suited to our needs! No need to go off the script or showcase our originality here. The answer is simple: we just embrace cliché!

“Uhh, Andou…?”

“What is it, Andou?”

As Tomoyo and Sayumi stared at me in confusion…I held my right hand aloft.

☆

“I’ll keep this simple: the true identity of what has you so worried right now, little lady, is just plain old guilt,” Kiryuu said with an air of casual nonchalance after listening to my whole story. He was such a good listener—or rather, he was so good at dragging my true feelings out of me—that I ended up sharing a surprising amount. Before I knew it, I’d told him pretty much everything.

I’d only spent about ten minutes or so explaining the whole situation, but from how he was talking, you’d think he’d seen through to the very core of my being after just that brief period of time. It made me feel a little uncomfortable…or at least sort of flustered, anyway.

“You think I feel guilty?”

“That’s right. You’d *think* you’d be worried about how you can never keep up with your childhood friend’s bizarre stories and inexplicable actions, or how obnoxious it is that he keeps shoving his hobbies onto you, or how the little dumbass *never* seems to think about *your* feelings…but that’s not really the problem, is it?”

I paused to think about it, but Kiryuu threw out another question just a moment later. “You don’t actually *want* this friend of yours to change, do you?”

“I mean… I…”

He was right. Juu was a completely incomprehensible boy, to the point that he could be seriously annoying sometimes. But so what? I was almost astonished to realize that, really, I didn’t want him to change at all. The

opposite, even. Deep down, I wanted him to stay just the same as he'd always been.

"No, the truth is that you're just ashamed of the fact that you can't understand him. You feel bad about not being able to sympathize with him. You're a real goody two-shoes, y'know that? Pretty rare to find someone with as pure a spirit of self-sacrifice as you have these days, Kushikawa Hatoko."

It felt like something had finally *clicked* inside me. Suddenly, it all made sense. I got a little sick of him sometimes, sure, and I was sort of jealous of how everyone else seemed to grasp what chuuni meant so easily, but none of those were the *real* issue. The primary cause for how I was feeling...

I sorta figured you wouldn't understand... Meh, that's just how it goes.

...was the sad, resigned smile that Juu had given me as he'd said those words. It'd been weighing on me ever since that day, and with it came an ever-building sense of guilt. That put the way I'd flipped out at him earlier into a sharp new context: I was probably just venting my frustrations, like a child who hates studying throwing a tantrum about school being useless when they can't solve a problem.

"You can never put yourself completely in the shoes of another person, and other people can never put themselves into your shoes, either. Everyone worries about this sorta stuff sometimes. That's just life. And in that sense, little lady, the big worry you're grappling with right now's as basic as it can get," said Kiryuu, giving me a glance that made it feel like he was appraising my reaction. He probably was, really, to try to judge whether I'd been relieved or shocked to hear that I was as average as could be.

Honestly, I was feeling both at the same time. On the one hand, I was glad to hear that my problems were perfectly normal, but on the other hand, I was a little disappointed that it wasn't something more dramatic than that. Suddenly, I saw everything he'd said about people wanting to be different, even as they wanted to fit in with everyone around them, in a whole new light. Is *that* what I was feeling?

"There's all sorts of ways to handle this sort of problem," he continued, "but in this case, the solution's incredibly easy."

"It's *easy*?" I repeated in astonishment.

"The thing you don't understand about him is his chuunibyou, right? Well, that makes this simple: you don't *have* to understand," said Kiryuu, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

It wasn't, though. *What on earth does that mean?* I thought, cocking my head.

"You don't have to understand," he repeated, "and you don't have to feel guilty for not understanding. You can just keep acting the same way you always have and not spare any of this a second thought."

"B-But that would mean—"

“That it’s only a matter of time before he decides he doesn’t need you anymore?” said Kiryuu, cutting me off and completing my thought. I gulped, and he grinned. “Sheesh—first I thought you were the shameless type, then I thought you were surprisingly sensitive and idealistic, and now I think you’re surprisingly *realistic*. Anyway, though, riddle me this: what’s so bad about not understanding something in the first place?”

“I-It’s, uhh… I mean, it sort of just feels like understanding is better than not understanding, in general.”

“You sure about that? For all you know, that sorta logic might not apply when it comes to chuunibyou,” said Kiryuu. He was really good at dodging past the point and keeping his answers ambiguous until he’d built them up to his satisfaction. “See, the thing is, chuunibyou is an exceptionally intricate and delicate concept. It’s built on so many complex, interweaving factors that it’s just about impossible to grasp the totality of it all in anything more than a vague, superficial sorta sense. Considering that, it’s a given that there’d be plenty of people out there who can’t even begin to understand it—people like you.”

I wasn’t totally following, but what I *did* understand was enough to make me hang my head with shame. Until, that is, he continued.

“But that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

“It…isn’t?”

“Your typical case study in chuunibyou wants other people to understand them. They’re all ‘Accept and acknowledge my magnificence, you ignorant plebeians!’, y’know? But at the same time, and to the same extent, they *don’t* want to be understood.”

They want people to understand them…but they don’t want to be understood? What? Isn’t that sort of a huge contradiction?

“I know what you’re thinking, and you’re right—it’s a contradiction. And a nasty one, at that. A contradiction with no possible resolution.”

“A contradiction without resolution…?”

“An Endless Paradox.”

Kiryuu smiled again, and I couldn’t help but feel that his expression carried some profound hidden meaning to it. *An Endless Paradox...* I had the feeling I’d heard those words somewhere before, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

“Chuunibyou patients—those who believe that not being like everyone else makes them awesome—can’t let themselves be understood that easily. If the bulk of the populace can accept you, then that means you don’t even count as a chuuni anymore. And so, even as you long for understanding, you don’t want to be understood at all. There’s a unique sense of solitude, of *pathos* that comes with being disavowed by the world, and for the right sort of person under the right circumstances, that very pathos can morph into a euphoria that can’t be beat.”

“And that,” continued Kiryuu, in the sort of tone adults use to admonish children, “is why people like you—people who can’t understand chuuni, no

matter how hard they try—are an absolutely vital presence in the life of someone like your childhood friend. He wouldn't be able to live true to himself without you, a friend who tries her hardest to understand him but fails at every turn. There's no way in hell he'd ever decide he doesn't need you anymore."

For a moment, we fell into silence. Then Kiryuu spoke up again. "So, tell me, little lady: what would you say true happiness is?"

"Uh, umm…" I stammered. The shift in topic was so sudden and jarring, I found myself floundering.

"You'd better not disappoint me with some lame-ass answer like 'money' or whatever," he added.

I decided to give the question some serious thought. *Hmm. Maybe eating delicious food? Or hanging out with your closest friends?* Judging by Kiryuu's attitude about the question, though, I had a feeling that he'd be upset if I gave him such pedestrian answers. He *had* just spent the past several minutes waxing philosophical at me (or at least, I *think* that was all some sort of philosophy). I was starting to feel ambitious, so I decided to give him an equally philosophical response.

"I think it's love," I replied, only to be overcome by a wave of intense shame the second the words left my mouth. *Oh, jeez, of all the ridiculously girly answers I could've given!*

Kiryuu, however, didn't poke fun at me for it. He didn't even laugh. Instead, he gave me a serious nod. "Not a bad answer. Romantic love, fraternal love, neighborly love, homosexual love, platonic love, self-love… If you roll all of those up into one single, all-encompassing 'love,' then I think you're onto something. That's about as close as it gets to a universal form of happiness."

I really wasn't thinking about it anywhere near that profoundly, but okay, I guess.

"I think you're going a little too far with it, though," he asserted. "It's *too* all-encompassing. The real answer's a lot more simple than that: true happiness…is to be chosen."

"To be…chosen?"

"In other words, to be needed by someone else. To have someone tell you that it *has* to be you; that nobody else will do. To know, to *feel*, that your existence is of vital importance to the world you live in. To be chosen is the greatest form of happiness that a human could ask for. In short," said Kiryuu, his one visible eye narrowing as he smiled gently, "everybody wants to be the chosen one."

I mulled over his words once again. I wasn't sure whether or not what he was saying was true. I couldn't prove it one way or another, and I didn't want to either. Regardless of the truth of his words, though, I was convinced of one thing. I finally understood.

All I ever wanted was for Juu to choose me. This whole time, I've just been afraid that he wouldn't.

“Anyway, that’s enough chatting for now,” said Kiryuu, calling an abrupt end to the conversation as he stood up and brushed the dirt from the back of his pants. He looked off down the riverside path and waved. Glancing in that direction, I could see a small group of people walking toward us. His friends, I assumed. “Thanks, little lady. Nothing like a good talk to kill some time.”

“N-No problem. I mean, actually, no, thank *you*!” I scrambled to my feet and gave him a quick bow of appreciation. “I, umm, well… I’m not really sure how to put this, but this has been a really helpful conversation for me.”

“Bwa ha ha! Don’t worry about it. Like I said, I was just killing time—or more accurately, buying time, I suppose? Not that it really makes a difference.”

And then…just like that…

He sneered.

A chill ran down my spine. Juu had lectured me over and over about the difference between a smile and a sneer, and all of a sudden, I finally understood exactly what he’d been trying to get at. I knew, without question, that the look on Kiryuu’s face could only possibly be a sneer. I wasn’t any closer to understanding the chuuni mindset, though, so I still didn’t see the appeal of the expression at all. Kiryuu sneered at me rapturously, but I didn’t think he looked cool. Nothing of the sort.

No, he looked *terrifying*.

And barely a moment later, I crumpled to the ground. It felt like a massive, invisible hammer had just swung down from the heavens and landed directly on my head.

“H-Huh? What the…?” I ended up on my hands and knees, barely keeping myself from collapsing prone on the grass. It was almost like I was kneeling down before him. I felt heavy—*unnaturally* heavy.

Something’s wrong. Is it all the running I did? Did it take this long for the exhaustion to catch up with me? Wh-Why do I feel so heavy…?

“Oh? Something wrong, little lady? Looks like you’ve got quite the weight on your shoulders,” said Kiryuu, peering down into my eyes. “Bwa ha ha! Don’t you worry. I’ll be sending you to the Heavens’ Hell soon enough.”

There’s that sneer again. It was an eerie, ominous expression that made the kindly smile he’d worn up till just a moment ago feel like an outright lie. Just looking at it was enough to send my heart into a state of turmoil. My head felt as heavy and unwieldy as a dumbbell, but I finally managed to lift it, only to see Kiryuu holding a hand up to his eyepatch.

“This right eye of mine has been sealed away. I’ll be living the eyepatch life for a while—doctor’s orders.” His smile grew wider, and the danger that lurked behind it deeper, as he spoke. “But I never said my Evil Eye *had* to be red, now, did I?”

What is he talking about? And who is he talking to?

“Now then, little lady—look into my eye.” I couldn’t help but obey his command, and the instant I did, his gaze seized hold of me. It was dark, pitch black, like an endless tunnel stretching on and on before me.

I groaned, but then, suddenly, the weight vanished. My body had gone from feeling as heavy as lead to feeling as light as a feather in the blink of an eye. And yet, for some reason, I still couldn’t stand back up. My mind was hazy, and dizziness was quickly overwhelming me. Before I even knew what was happening, I was face-down in the grass.

Huuuh? What’s going on? Why am I so…sleepy…?

“You’re late, people!” said Kiryuu from somewhere up above me. I could tell that a group was gathering around me, and dim as my consciousness was, I just barely managed to listen in as their conversation unfolded.

“The oath of inevitable decapitation: *Head Hunting*, aka Natsu Aki.”

“*Huuuh*? You really in any place to say that? We’re only late ’cause we had to pick up *your* eye medicine, ’cause *you* told us to, ’Ryuu! You got any idea how far away the nearest drugstore is? It took friggin’ forever!” said a girl with black-rimmed glasses and braided hair long enough to almost touch the ground.

“The seeker in realms unsought: *Dead Space*, aka Akutagawa Yanagi.”

“Huh? Uh, sure,” said a small-statured boy wearing headphones and playing a portable game console.

“The Evil Eye under lock and key: *Eternal Wink*, aka Saitou Hitomi.”

“Umm, Hajime? Do you really think you should be rattling off all of our power names like that? The apron girl isn’t going to be joining us or anything, is she?” said a suit-clad woman who was keeping one of her eyes conspicuously squeezed shut.

“The toothed blade of sinful misalignment: *Zigzag Jigsaw*, aka Toki Shuugo.”

“Just let him do his thing, Hitomi. Kiryuu’s the sorta hopeless chuuni nutjob that gets off on listing the power names he thought up whenever he has an excuse,” said a young man in a tank top. He held a worn-down knife in his mouth, its blade so nicked and dented it didn’t look like it had much of an actual *blade* left to speak of.

“The lunar goddess who ravishes the solar deities: *Sex Eclipse*, aka Yusano Fantasia.”

“*P-Please*, I’m begging you, stop calling me that name! Did you *have* to put s-s-sex in it? Ugh, I’m so ashamed…” moaned a blonde-haired woman who wore a tracksuit jacket over a bright pink nurse’s uniform.

“The endlessly altered Decalogue: *White Rulebook*, aka Tanaka Umeko.”

The last member of the group—a little girl dressed in an all-black outfit that matched her hair—didn’t say so much as a word.

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“Hmm…? Hey, Hitomi. Where’s *Lost Regalia*?”

“Hinoemata left to go home and watch a TV show. I *said* that you wouldn’t be happy about it, but you can imagine how well that worked... Sorry. I’m not doing a very good job supervising everyone, I know.”

“Bwa ha ha! Don’t worry about it—I’m not gonna pin that one on you. Better to let *Lost Regalia* fly free for now, all things considered. Anyway, I’ll leave cleaning up here to you.”

“Got it. Would you please carry the apron girl for us, Umeko?”

The black-haried girl gave a silent, expressionless nod…and with that, the world faded away into darkness.

Chapter 8: Awakening——Anew

Hatoko and I had a special sort of relationship. Society likes to call people like us “childhood friends,” but when I really thought about it, I wasn’t actually all that sure what sort of relationship that even is.

Hatoko had always been a bit of a space cadet, and it felt like I’d always been there to back her up when she needed me. On the other hand, I’d always had a tendency to go *way* overboard at times, and Hatoko had always been there to calmly watch over me, even when I was at my worst.

We were the same age, of course, but sometimes, it felt like she was my older sister, and sometimes, it felt like I was her older brother. Technically speaking, Hatoko was born just a little bit before me, and whenever her birthday rolled around, she loved to brag about how she was a year older than me for the brief period it lasted.

So, yeah, it was a weird and confusing sort of relationship—but maybe “weird and confusing” is actually the perfect way to define it. That’s why when Sagami told me that he had no idea why we hung out together, I couldn’t bring myself to argue with him. But is that really a problem?

Why *did* we hang out together? The answer was so obvious, I didn’t even have to think about it: we hung out together because we wanted to.

Five hours had passed since Hatoko went missing. That was hardly a long time in the grand scheme of things, but over the course of those measly five hours, a whirlwind of events had completely turned my sense of priorities on its head and set me thinking about all sorts of things I’d never considered before.

In the end, though, the answer I settled on was the same one I always did: my only move was to keep being myself. And with that decision reached, I thrust out my right hand.

“Wh-What’re you doing, Andou?” Tomoyo nervously asked, blinking with astonishment. “You’re not, like, planning on using your power, are you?”

“I sure am.”

“Wh-What’re you thinking? How could *Dark and Dark* possibly help us in this situation? Not that there are *any* situations it could help in, but you know what I mean.”

She was precisely right. *Dark and Dark* couldn’t help us find Hatoko. I probably don’t even have to say this, but *The End* wasn’t a people-finding power either.

“Don’t overthink this, Tomoyo,” I said. “I’m just doing the obvious. Using your supernatural power in a supernatural battle’s as basic as it gets. There’s no need whatsoever to think too far outside the box here. Classic plot developments, after all, are classic for a reason!”

“Okay, but what’s that supposed to—”

“Just so you know, I’m about as desperate now as I’ve ever been. The situation’s life or death, and we’ve been dealt a lousy hand. But there’s still just one move left that’ll let us break through the wall before us!”

When the protagonist of a supernatural battle story is backed into a corner, what’s always bound to happen?

“I just have to undergo an awakening!”

That’s all it takes—if I awaken to a new power, the problem’s as good as solved! Yes, the sort of hyper-specific power that makes you want to question whether or not it’ll ever be useful again after the enemy of the week is defeated! Now that’s a classic supernatural battle plot twist if I’ve ever heard one!

“I’m about to awaken to a new power that’ll let me find Hatoko, here and now! Expediency trumps all when the plot’s at stake, right?”

Tomoyo and Sayumi’s eyes widened with shock.

“W-Wait a second, Andou…” said Tomoyo. “Like…what? For real? Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m *very* sane.”

“B-But, you’re going to *awaken*? *Now*? The odds of an awakening being *that* convenient have gotta be astronomical!”

“You’re wrong there—awakenings are, by their very nature, *always* timed for the sake of maximum convenience!” Tomoyo’s chiding wasn’t even close to enough to shake my resolve. I was *committed*.

“Okay, let’s say I cut you some slack—actually, make that a *lot* of slack—and assume that the sort of awakening you’re talking about is even *possible*…though wait, I guess you already awakened once, so we sorta already know it is? Not the point! Anyway, you *just* had an awakening! You seriously think you’ll get another one this soon?!”

“Hmph!” I chortled, brushing her concern off with ease. “When did anyone ever say that you can only have *one* awakening?”

“Ugh…” Tomoyo didn’t have a comeback for that one.

I clenched my fist with all my might. Let them ridicule me for bowing to plot expediency. Let them slander me for being repetitive and predictable. None of that changes the fundamental truth that…

“When a protagonist is in trouble, they’ll awaken as many times as it takes to get them back out of it!”

That’s just how it works for the sort of protagonists I’ve always looked up to. What sort of sorry excuse for a supernatural power can’t awaken for convenience’s sake every once in a while? What sorry excuse for a supernatural battle story wouldn’t let that happen?!

“Andou…you *wouldn’t*,” said Sayumi with a scowl. “Surely you don’t mean you intend to use *Dark and Dark of the End*?”

“What?!” shouted Tomoyo.

I didn’t say a word, so Sayumi continued. “If being driven into a corner is a prerequisite to your plan working, then *that* power could hardly be more appropriate. Useless though it may be in virtually all conceivable

circumstances, the one thing it's perfect for is putting you in a state of crisis."

"I mean, yeah, but...sh-she's wrong, isn't she, Andou?" stammered Tomoyo.

I kept my mouth firmly shut, thrusting my fist before me once more.

"Don't! Are you *crazy*?!" Tomoyo yelled. "You remember what happened *last* time, don't you?!"

"Don't worry. Sayumi's here, so it's not like I'm gonna die or anything." *And as long as I don't die, it'll all work out...hopefully.*

I looked over at Sayumi and found her silently returning my gaze, her eyes filled with sorrow. We had an ally with absolute, ultimate healing abilities on our team, and that left us with no choice but to put her power to practical use. We just had to steel ourselves and treat horrific injury with all the indifference of a *Dragon Ball* or *Shaman King* character. No matter how badly we were maimed, she could put us right in an instant. That meant that I could drive myself to the very brink of death while still remaining *relatively* safe. And if I drove myself that far, an awakening was all but inevitable.

"Th-This isn't some manga, you know?!" shouted Tomoyo. "You know what using *The End* would put you through, right? For all we know, you were lucky it didn't go any farther than just your arm last time!"

"It's for Hatoko's sake. I can put up with a little pain if it helps us find her. Besides—this is the punishment I deserve for making her cry."

"But—"

"Y'know what they call putting your life on the line for the sake of a single girl?" I asked her.

Tomoyo didn't answer; I gave her a grin. "They call it the goddamn *best*, that's what. Stand back, okay?"

I began to concentrate. Tomoyo looked like she still had something to say, but one look at my face was all it took to make her jump with surprise and take a reflexive step back. *Jeez, what sort of expression am I making right now?*

"Some whisper fearfully of the Lord of Crime and Punishment, while others sing praise to the Sovereign of Sin and Damnation, but know ye this: I am all that, and more! Now, witness me as I bring my all to bear!"

I focused all of my senses into my right arm. I focused my very *being* into my right arm.

Now—let us begin the end of the beginning!

"I am he who conquers chaos!"

As if reciting a prayer, as if chanting a mantra, I began to intone the Malediction of Unleashing.

"O purgatorial flame that sways upon the brink of the Abyss, O twisted blaze of sable darkness, blighted crimson of deepest night! O howling, maddening inferno that paves the road to oblivion..."

Up to that point, I'd recited the Malediction as normal, but from then on, a slight change was in order. This wasn't your everyday recitation. It was a Malediction meant to unleash my power's next stage—a *forbidden* Malediction.

I guess you haven't had the chance to hear this version yet, have you, Hatoko? 'Course, I bet you'd just tell me that you don't understand the point of it all, even if you were here. Still, though, I want you to hear it. So please, hurry up and come back to us!

"…Amidst discord and ruin, we rot within a cradle of sin. Criminals in want of salvation: know ye that your misdeeds beggar atonement! Struggle in vain till you curse the fate that binds you! Raise your festering blade to your worthless throat, wallow in the depths of despair, and cut thine own life to the quick!"

"Dark and Dark of the End!"

I felt it coming. My hair stood on end all across my body, and my senses were honed to a knife's edge in anticipation of what was to come. I felt as frozen as if I were lost in a blizzard, yet as hot as if I'd leapt into a raging conflagration. I could feel myself sinking, inch by inch, foot by foot, into a bottomless marsh; I could feel my body being carved up, bit by bit, falling to the floor in a heap of so many jigsaw pieces.

Deep within me, a gaping maw was wrenched open, revealing the unfathomable depths of darkness within. And deep within that darkness lurked *someone*. Someone, yet no one at all—or at the very least, not *me* by any stretch of the imagination. Whoever they may have been, they were *not* me. Never.

That someone who was not me, deep within their sea of nihility, beckoned me closer, and I answered their call without hesitation. I knew instinctively that if I were to just take them by the hand, all would come to an end. And so, I reached out, further, to grasp that forbidden power and bring it to—

"Whahuh?!"

Suddenly, the world was turned on its head. My consciousness was forcibly yanked back to reality, and I found myself sprawled out on the ground, staring up at the sky. Sayumi had my right arm firmly within her grip and thoroughly locked in place. I was completely immobilized.

The pieces quickly came together: she'd taken me down with a perfect one-armed shoulder throw. The sort of harsh but gentle throw that hurts like the devil without actually *injuring* its victim at all.

"Sayumi…" I growled. "Don't try to stop me."

"I refuse."

"Please let me go."

"I will not."

"Let *go*."

“Shut up.”

Sayumi shot me a glare so cold, it actually gave me chills. From her perspective, of course, I was shooting her the exact same sort of look. After a few seconds of terrifyingly potent tension, though, she loosened her grip and smiled.

“An awakening isn’t something you can approach so lightheartedly, Andou. They’re always exciting developments, certainly, but tossing them out haphazardly one after another is sure to make your readers lose interest in no time at all. You just awakened the other day, so I believe that now is the time for you to step back and exercise some restraint for once.”

“As such,” she continued, “this time, *I* will go through an awakening.”

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“First.”

“Hmm? What is it, Umeko? It’s not every day you decide to talk. If you’re asking for a Hi-Chew, sorry, but I didn’t bring any today.”

“The girl who controls the elements disappeared.”

“…She what, now?”

Chapter 9: Cyclical——Regression

Takanashi Sayumi's power, *Route of Origin*, granted her the ability to return anything to the way it's meant to be. The one and only condition for its use: she had to first touch the subject in question.

When you really think about it, though, "the way that something is meant to be" is a pretty darn abstract concept. Determining how something is *meant* to be, as far as I can tell, is totally impossible from any sort of objective perspective. It stands to reason, then, that *Route of Origin*'s definition of the way something is meant to be was based purely upon Sayumi's own subjective perception of reality. There's no other way it could possibly work, really.

In other words, how Sayumi perceived the things she observed—how she perceived the world itself—was profoundly connected to the function of her ability. She could only heal injuries if she believed that the human body was *meant* to be healthy and whole. She could only repair a broken object if she believed that object was *meant* to exist in the state it was in before it was destroyed.

She had a certain degree of control over the process, to be clear. If she were presented with a torn notebook, for instance, she was capable of both returning it to a brand new, fresh-off-the-shelf state and also returning it to the wood that had been used to manufacture the notebook in the first place. My best guess is that in her mind, both of those states counted on some level as the way that it was meant to be. That's what it always boiled down to: on a fundamental level, her view of the world trumped all.

That raised some interesting questions, and at one point, I decided to ask her one of them. "So," I said, "what if you decided that humanity was a blight upon the planet Earth? If you managed to convince yourself that the way the Earth was meant to be didn't include people, would you be able to wipe out the whole human race by just touching the ground?"

I was mostly kidding, of course. Sayumi sighed as she replied.

"I'd never develop an opinion as infantile as that in the first place. The thought that humanity poses a threat to the Earth is in and of itself a perfect example of humanity's persistent self-importance. We're too prone to forgetting that we ourselves are nothing more than one part of the Earth's ecosystem, and get the mistaken, arrogant idea in our heads that we're somehow separate from the totality of it all. I certainly believe that protecting and preserving the beauty of our environment is important, don't get me wrong, but even that—the concept of 'beauty'—is based solely upon our uniquely human sense of values. That's something I couldn't forget, even if I wanted to."

It was a thoroughly informative sermon, as I'd learned to expect from Sayumi, but there was one tiny detail that I couldn't help but catch: she never actually said that she *couldn't* do it. And when you really sit down and

think about that fact, the implications are horrifying. I realized that *Route of Origin*'s true, terrible potential may very well surpass even the limits of *my* imagination.

"Mnh, 'm sweepy..."

"I'm very sorry about this, Chifuyu. We would have preferred not to wake you up, if at all possible."

"Mnh, 's okay, Sayumi. If Hatoko needs me, I can do it."

The sun had long since set, and we'd made our way to a nearby residential district. Specifically, we were standing before the Himeki household. Chifuyu was dressed in her pajamas, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and carrying Squirrely under one arm. Apparently, she used the plushie as an improvised hugging pillow.

Sayumi had a plan, and pulling it off required Chifuyu to be present. We never would've dragged her out of her house at that time of night otherwise. It was around nine o'clock at that point, and bringing a grade schooler out into the night at that hour was a patently absurd proposal. Further complicating matters was the fact that we couldn't even begin to explain the circumstances to her parents, not to mention the fact that she was already off in dreamland by the time we'd arrived.

Thankfully, we had *Closed Clock* on our side. The operation was the picture of simplicity. First, I went up to Chifuyu's house and rang the doorbell. The moment one of her parents came to answer the door, Tomoyo stopped time and slipped inside. She made her way to Chifuyu's room, scooped her up (Squirrely and all), and brought her outside. Mission accomplished, just like that.

And yeah, okay, *technically* it was totally kidnapping on our part, but this was a state of emergency! Cut us some slack! Anyway, we took a moment to explain the situation to her, and Chifuyu enthusiastically told us to leave it to her.

"Mnh. Done," she said, holding out a hand. A black circle appeared in the air before her—a different shade of black than the nighttime scenery around us. She'd used *World Create* to generate a warp in space-time. "It goes to the literary club's room."

"Thanks, Chifuyu! We owe you one!" I exclaimed.

"We should hurry," added Sayumi. "Otherwise, her parents might realize that their daughter is missing."

"Ugh... I swear I'll never get used to jumping into these Gates..." grumbled Tomoyo.

"It's not that hard. It just feels normal after a while," said Chifuyu.

And so, the four of us stepped through the portal. Our school had closed up for the night quite a while back, incidentally. We didn't have the skills to sneak past the guard or deal with the building's security system, so the only way for us to make it into our club room was to have Chifuyu teleport us there. Of course, that wasn't the *only* reason why we went to the trouble of dragging her out of bed.

A strange sort of floating sensation came over me as I passed through the Gate, and an instant later, we were standing in the dark, unlit club room. I'd never been there at that time of night before, and the walls that felt so familiar during the daytime came across as anything but in the darkness.

"I would recommend against turning the light on, Tomoyo," said Sayumi.

"Ah, right, duh! Sorry," Tomoyo replied. She'd been reaching out toward the light switch, but quickly pulled her hand back.

"Thankfully, we've been blessed with a beautiful moon tonight. Even without the lights on, I don't imagine we'll have any difficulties," Sayumi added with a faint smile that I could just barely make out thanks to the moonlight shining through the window. It made her expression look almost mystical, somehow.

"Sayumi...are you really sure about this?" I asked, unable to contain myself. "You really think you can pull it off? I get the theory and all, but if this works, it'll be a downright miracle."

"Perhaps, but if I fail, that just means that we'll have to try awakening your power next. Don't worry. If it comes to that, I won't stop you."

I fell into silence.

"That said," added Sayumi, "I believe the odds of my success aren't bad at all."

The four of us sat around the table, just like we always did. Just like usual.

"Now then, allow me to take attendance. Please respond when I call your name," said Sayumi. Her voice projected with the clear, formal authority of her position. She was in club president mode. "Kanzaki Tomoyo."

"Here."

"Andou Jurai."

"Here."

"Himeki Chifuyu."

"Here."

"Kushikawa Hatoko."

Needless to say, no reply came. Sayumi's voice echoed through the room in vain.

"Oh, dear. Is Hatoko absent today, perhaps? That won't do at all. The forty-fourth generation of Senkou High School's literary club simply isn't complete without all five of us present... Indeed, if even one of us is missing, then our club *is not the way it's meant to be.*"

Sayumi raised both hands up to the level of her chest, silently bringing them together as if she was grasping the air between them—touching the atmosphere of the room itself, touching the very concept of the Senkou High literary club.

"And, in that case...let us return things to the way they're meant to be."

And so, with her characteristic lack of flair, Sayumi activated her power. She attempted to return a concept to its natural state of being.

This was the new method of using *Route of Origin* that she'd come up with. We'd always talked her power up, saying that it could restore *anything*, but when all was said and done, she'd never actually used it on anything without physical form. I hadn't even considered the possibility, really, so when Sayumi described her plan to me, I was seriously shocked.

Sneaking into the literary club's room and bringing Chifuyu with us were all for the sake of completing the picture. We needed to be in the right place, and we needed the right members present. The image had to be strong and all but whole, lacking only the presence of Kushikawa Hatoko to bring it to completion.

"*Route of Origin*'s next stage..." I whispered, very nearly trembling with awe. Sayumi's power had indeed surpassed my imagination by leaps and bounds, and I was so amazed I couldn't possibly hide my delight. "*Route of Origin: Ouroboros's Circle*."

"Andou, I'm trying to concentrate. Please be quiet," snapped Sayumi, shooting a glare in my direction.

Just a moment later, a faint glow began to manifest in the single empty seat remaining in the room.

No way... Is it actually working? Did we actually manage to summon Hatoko right to us from who knows where? Has the literary club returned to the way it's meant to be?

Finally, Sayumi lowered her hands and let out a sigh of relief. "I believe we can consider this a success. Heh! I'm surprised how simple it was when I put my mind to it, actually."

As she spoke, the light—fainter than the moonlight, even—faded away, revealing the silhouette of a girl laid out on the table. She was perfectly still, but I could hear the regular rhythm of her breathing.

"Hatoko!" I shouted, springing up from my chair and dashing over to her. She was still wearing her apron, and her feet were a mess. She must've lost both her slippers somewhere along the way as well. "Hey, Hatoko! Wake up! *Hatoko*!"

"Mnhh... Mnah?" she mumbled as she stirred. "Mmngh... Five more minutes..."

"This is no time for stupid clichés, Hatoko!"

"Mmngh... Five more light-years..."

"Light-years measure distance, not time... Wait, quit making me sound like the Jr. Trainer from the Pewter City Gym!"

"Hmmnhg... Oh, it's Juu. Morning."

"Good morning to you too."

"Yeah... Huh?!"

Hatoko finally achieved consciousness and sat up with a start. I, meanwhile, was relieved. *Oh, good. She really was just asleep.*

"What? Wait, wha, huh?! Where am I?! Th-The club room? And why're you here, Juu? Wait, *everyone's* here...? Huuuh?"

“I have so many questions…” I sighed. “First off, where *were* you? What on earth have you been doing this whole time?”

“Oh, umm,” Hatoko mumbled, “I ran until I got tired, and there was this nice young man with an eyepatch, but then he got really scary, and there was something about an Evil Eye, and then I felt really heavy, then really light, then *really* sleepy, and then suddenly, a bunch of his friends showed up all around me…”

“What does *any* of that mean? Are you still half asleep?”

“N-No, I’m awake…but…huh? Huuuh? Was it…all just a dream? Maybe I just fell asleep on the riverbank and never even realized it…?”

Hatoko looked more than a little worried as she sank into thought. I still wanted to know what she’d been doing all evening, of course, but I couldn’t bring myself to care *that* much in the heat of the moment. I was so happy to see her safe and sound that nothing else mattered to me.

“B-But why am I *here*?” asked Hatoko. “How did *that* happen?”

“Oh, that was Sayumi’s work,” I explained. “Her power’s reached its next stage. It’s all thanks to *Route of Origin: Ouroboros’s Circle*!”

“Ou-Ouroboros? Umm, that’s the hungry hungry snake that eats its own tail, I think?”

“What?! No! The Ouroboros doesn’t eat its tail because it’s *hungry*!”

“Huh? Then, did it bite it by accident? What a klutzy little snakey!”

“No, no, *no*! The Uroboros isn’t a klutz! It’s not like some stupid dog that chases its own tail!”

“Oh, really?”

“*Yes*, really! In ancient Greek, Ouroboros translates to ‘tail-eating serpent,’ and its act of self-consumption is a symbol that represents life and rebirth, beginnings and endings, a complete, transcendent existence, the cycle of eternity, and, uhh…a bunch of other stuff too! Anyway, the point is it’s not just a snake—it’s a hella cool snake!”

“Hmm. I don’t think I really get it!”

“Sheesh, you *never*—”

At that point, both of our mouths snapped shut. We’d finally remembered the argument that had led to our parting, and suddenly the whole situation felt incredibly awkward. It had only been a matter of hours since that spectacular meltdown, and yet there we were, acting as if nothing whatsoever was out of the ordinary. It was almost laughable.

In fact, it *was* laughable, and it wasn’t long before we couldn’t hold it in anymore and both of us devolved into a fit of uncontrollable giggles. Eventually, I composed myself enough to look her in the eye.

“Hey, Hatoko? Sorry.” For all sorts of things, really.

“Wha? N-No, don’t say that! *I’m* sorry! I’m the one who started screaming at you out of nowhere, and I never even finished making dinner…”

“It’s fine, really. That doesn’t matter at all.”

“And I lost your slippers too…”

“That doesn’t matter either. It was all my fault, anyway. It always has been…”

“No, it’s mine! You didn’t do anything wrong. It was all in my head, really…”

And with that, the pleasant, genial atmosphere did a one-eighty and landed right back in the awkward zone. We had so much to say to each other, but neither of us had any idea how to go about saying it.

“Hey, uhh, guys? I have something to tell you,” said Tomoyo, her voice slicing right through the uncomfortable haze that was descending upon us. I looked over to find that she was blushing, and considering how dark it was in the room, the fact that I could tell must’ve meant that she was *really* full-on flushed. “I’m trying to be a light novel author.”

Huh? Where the hell did that come from? She picked now, of all times, to drop that bombshell on everyone? And isn’t that literally the exact phrase she said would make her look like a moron earlier today?

While I was bewildered, Tomoyo kept talking, rattling off an explanation at a mile a minute. “That’s why I couldn’t write anything for the light novel exercise we did today. Since writing light novels is my dream, I ended up putting all sorts of pressure on myself, and I couldn’t follow through at all. I’ve kept quiet about it up until now since I wanted to tell you guys *after* I’d actually written something worthwhile, but I changed my mind just now!”

“You’re going to be a writer, Tomoyo?” asked Chifuyu, looking up at Tomoyo with a spark of unmistakable interest in her gaze.

“Ah, no, I mean…I wouldn’t exactly say I’m *going* to be one? I just *want* to be one, that’s all…”

“Tomoyo, you’re amazing!” The sparkle in Chifuyu’s eyes grew into a shining beacon of esteem.

“U-Ugh…” Meanwhile, Tomoyo turned an even deeper shade of red and looked away. The look on her face spoke volumes. Specifically, it was saying something to the tune of “This is *exactly* why I didn’t want to tell anyone!”

Tomoyo took a deep breath, then she glanced over at me for just a moment. “Some stuff happened, and Andou ended up finding out about my writing the other day.” Next, she turned to look at Hatoko. “But I basically suck at it, and I ended up asking him to stay behind after school today to give me some advice. That’s really all there was to it, Hatoko.”

“Oh…okay. Is that all?”

Hatoko paused to let out a quick sigh of relief, and Tomoyo smiled. There was still an oddly sad feeling to the atmosphere between them, though. I hadn’t really picked up on the nuance to their exchange, so I wasn’t entirely clear what they’d just communicated with each other.

“But anyway,” said Hatoko after a moment, “you want to be a writer, Tomoyo? I had no idea!”

“I actually knew, as it so happens,” chimed in Sayumi.

“*Bwah*?!” Tomoyo shrieked. “Wh-What? Y-You knew…?”

“Yes, I’ve known for quite a long while. Frankly, Tomoyo, you’re very easy to read.”

I think you’re just too good at reading people, Sayumi. Way too good.

“W-Well, you could’ve *said* something…” mumbled Tomoyo.

“I was hoping that you would open up about it yourself. That’s why I chose such a strange theme for today’s activity, actually. I thought it would present a good opportunity for you to tell us,” said Sayumi with a tone of perfect nonchalance. This time, she caught *all* of us by surprise.

“Seriously? That was all part of a plan for you?” I asked in disbelief.

“Of course. I wouldn’t choose a theme as difficult as ‘light novels’ if I didn’t have some specific goal in mind, after all. It’s far too abstract for that sort of creative exercise.”

I mean, yeah, but still—seriously…? I was thoroughly dumbfounded, and I resolved to always assume that everything Sayumi did was motivated by some sort of specific intent, no matter how random it seemed.

“All that said, of course, my plan failed spectacularly,” she added with a self-deprecating chuckle.

I was starting to understand why she and Tomoyo had come running the second they realized something was up. Both of them felt a degree of responsibility for Hatoko’s disappearance, most likely. I, meanwhile, was the one who *should’ve* felt far and away the most responsibility for all of it.

“Hatoko?” I said, once again turning to face my childhood friend. “So, umm…I know this probably doesn’t come through most of the time, but I really appreciate you.”

“Huh…?”

“You’re always there for me, and you give me a lot more emotional support than you know. I can’t count how many times you being there to listen to me, and *enjoy* listening to me, has really made a difference for me. It always makes me happy when you try to understand the things I tell you about.”

Hatoko looked down at her feet and didn’t say anything, so I kept going.

“Like back in our second year of middle school. I seriously don’t think I’d have lived through that if you hadn’t been there for me.”

Hatoko continued to hang her head. An uncomfortable silence fell over the room, and before long, my awkward bashfulness got the better of me and I opened my mouth again.

“So, like, y’know…I’m sure I’m gonna keep saying a ton of stuff you don’t understand from now on, but still…I’d like to…st-stay…”

Hoooly crap, is it just me, or am I saying something incredibly embarrassing right now? Gah, it’s no use! I can’t take it!

“Mwa ha ha!” I bellowed maniacally, giving in and dauntlessly cracking a grin. The most assertive—and most shameless—side of my personality had taken the wheel.

“Your place in this world is not before me, nor is it behind me! We walk a road untrodden, fraught with dangers and riddled with briars! Though

towering heaps of corpses may bar our path, to climb over them and continue our endless journey is our fate! But to travel this path of carnage and brutality alone is a task too daunting for even one such as myself. Thus, I have need of a companion!”

I turned to Hatoko and held a hand out toward her.

“I want you to travel this road by my side, Hatoko! I have need of you!”

Well, that was... I mean, it was certainly an extremely me *way of putting it, in the end.* Tomoyo and Sayumi were both rolling their eyes and sighing in a way that just screamed “Why did he have to take it in *that* direction...?” Chifuyu, meanwhile, had fallen asleep at some point while we weren’t paying attention to her.

Hatoko, on the other hand, just stared at me in a daze. Then, finally, she beamed.

“Yeah, okay!” she said, her smile as bright and vivid as a newly bloomed flower. It was the sort of smile I loved seeing on her—the sort of smile that suited her best. Hatoko took my hand and squeezed it tightly.

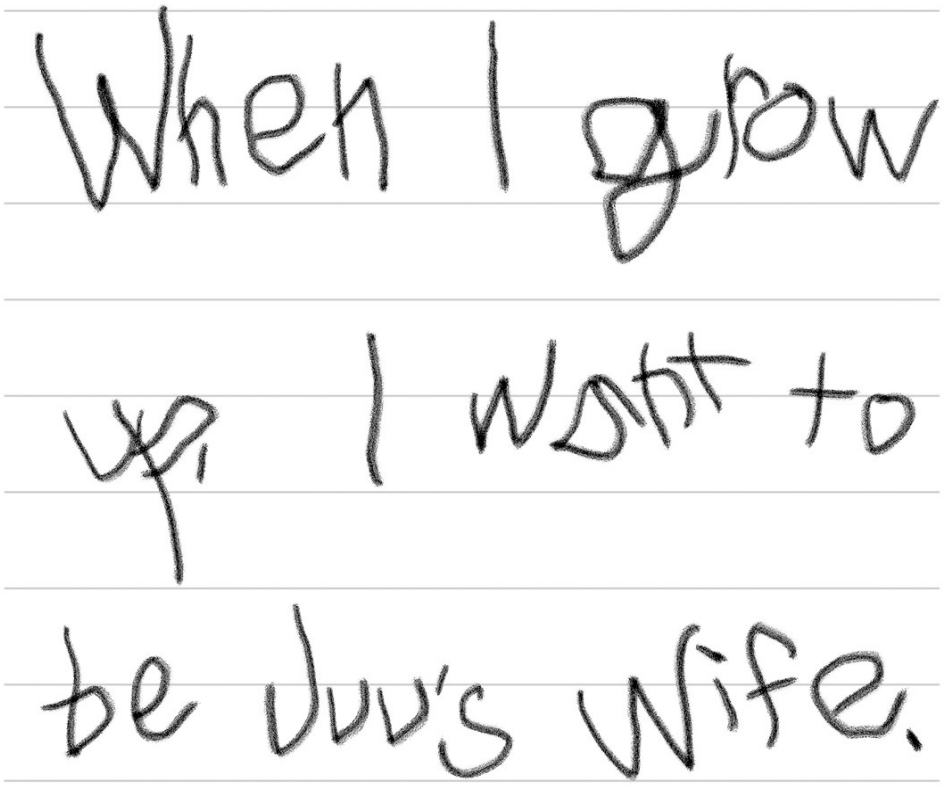
“Your hand’s kinda warm, Juu!”

“Hmm? Mwa ha ha—of course it is! After all, the stygian flame of Purgatory, *Dark and Dark* dwells within my right arm!”

“No, that’s not it,” said Hatoko, gently shaking her head. “It’s warm because it’s *your* hand!”

And so, the two of us made up. It wasn’t like anything had been resolved, or like anything had even changed. We’d simply reaffirmed what we’d already known: that I could be myself, and she could be herself, and that was fine. Maybe our relationship was unnatural, maybe it wasn’t, but regardless, I was confident that we’d carry it on for a long while to come. And though there was no telling what might happen in the long term, somehow, I didn’t particularly mind that fact.

And so, Hatoko and I finally unbuttoned the shirt that was our relationship...only to button it right back up the wrong way again.



Excerpt from Hatoko's kindergarten diary

Epilogue: Undo July——Sagamicizm——Kill You First

“Here you go. Hatoko’s cellphone, as promised.”

It was the next day, and we were up on the third floor of our school. Well, technically, we were outside the school, out on the fire escape you could only access by opening a door we were expressly *not* supposed to open unless there was an ongoing emergency. The view from the fire escape’s landing was really nice, but people didn’t go there often (for obvious reasons), so the only ones around on that particular day were me and Sagami. He handed me the phone, and I stowed it away in my jacket’s pocket.

“Sounds like you had a pretty rough time of it, but I guess this was a ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ sorta situation, huh? Guess everything’s back to normal and right as rain now. Good for you.”

Though I didn’t feel obligated to keep Sagami apprised of my affairs in a broad sense—like, not even a *little* bit—I did sort of feel like he deserved the whole story in this particular case, and I’d given him a general rundown of what had happened. Sagami, of course, brushed it off with an air of casual indifference.

“Yeah, it all worked out, and thanks for that,” I replied.

“Hey, Andou? Are you mad at me?” Sagami asked, his tone of voice dropping down by a couple of notches. He didn’t *look* particularly worried about it, though. The opposite, if anything—the way he was looking at me was downright instigative. Like he was testing me.

“Huh? Why would I be mad at you?” I replied.

“Well, I said some pretty awful things to you, for one thing. Oh, and I prioritized *Precure* over Hatoko, that’s another. I actually feel just a little bit bad about that, believe it or not.”

“As if. And if somehow you actually do feel bad, you should at least *try* to look like you’re sorry,” I jabbed back. “Anyway, I’m not really angry regardless.”

That was the pure and honest truth. I genuinely didn’t feel much of anything toward Sagami at all. After all, you can only get angry with someone if you actually expect better of them. It’s hard for someone to betray your expectations when you expect literally nothing from them in the first place, and that’s exactly the position that Sagami inhabited in my mind.

I *guess* you could say that we had something akin to a perfectly ordinary friendship going, and that was a sort of relationship that carried absolutely no expectations at all in my mind. As such, I wasn’t angry with him in the least. I knew all too well what sort of person Sagami Shizumu was.

“We’ve always been this way with each other, haven’t we? Ever since we first met,” I observed. *Ever since we first met back in the second year of middle school.*

“True ’nuff. You and I have a friendship of convenience for the ages.”

“You’d better believe it. Just thinking about *you* coming running to get me out of trouble makes me wanna hurl. And for the record, if *you’re* ever the one in trouble, I won’t be lifting a finger either.”

“Hmm. I wonder about that,” Sagami commented evasively, flashing me a smile so bewitchingly charming I *definitely* would’ve fallen for him on the spot if I were a girl. Being me, however, it just came across as insufferable. “I wouldn’t be too surprised if you *did* come running to save me, actually. You’re quite the charmer.”

“Huh? A *charmer*? Funny, hearing that from *you* makes it sound totally meaningless.”

“I’m not talking about your looks, I’m talking about what’s on the inside.” Sagami pulled his phone out from his pocket. “Ah, sorry, Andou. Gotta take this.”

“Who’s it from?”

“Hmm…my SO.”

“You got *another* girlfriend? Already?”

“Not quite. I’m talking about a different sort of SO this time,” Sagami cryptically replied, then answered his phone.

I mouthed the word “later” at him, then opened the emergency exit, heading back into the school and leaving Sagami out on the landing.

“Hello hello, Sagamin, aka Sagami Shizumu, speaking. Or rather—”

The door clicked shut, cutting off the remainder of Sagami’s sentence.

“Or rather, Sagami Shizumu, the guy you saddled with the disgustingly chuuni-riffic name *Innocent Onlooker*.”

☆

“So, how’s the eye doing, Kiryuu?”

After explaining everything I’d just learned from Andou, I lapsed into idle small talk. The person I was talking to, Kiryuu Hajime, was an irredeemable chuuni nutjob who’d gone so far overboard playing evil-eye he’d gotten himself an actual eye infection.

“Terribly,” Kiryuu grumbled. “The swelling’s not going down at all. Makes me wish I had that ointment that Rukawa Kaede used to get rid of his swelling overnight before the big match with Sannoh High.”

“Save the deep-cut manga references for your sister, please.” I never liked having to call out that sort of nonsense. If any nonsense is getting called out in my vicinity, I want it to be *mine*. Railing on and on about somebody else’s joke just isn’t my jam. “Railing girls, on the other hand, I’m totally up for.”

“The hell are you talking about, Shizumu?”

“By the way,” I continued, “what exactly were you trying to accomplish with all this, Kiryuu? Were you just that desperate to make contact with Hatoko? Was that really worth making me go out of my way to *steal her cell phone*?”

I told Andou that I’d happened to bump into her and that she’d happened to drop her phone. That was a lie. I mean, really, how could anyone believe a coincidence that convenient would ever actually happen? The truth was that I’d deliberately bumped into her and lifted her phone right out from her pocket, just like Kiryuu had told me to.

“I bet she only got lost because someone used a power on her too, right? That girl may be an airhead, but even if she *was* overcome with rage, the fact that she just *happened* to get lost at the perfect time for your purposes was way too good to be true.”

“Bwa ha ha! Can’t deny that. The little lady getting lost and our meeting of destiny were both inevitabilities brought about by virtue of *Dead Space*.”

“Oh, that one—the power to mess with the gaps between things.” Yes, that would certainly explain it all. Akutagawa Yanagi’s power would make it a piece of cake.

“And as for why I decided to make contact with Kushikawa Hatoko…” Kiryuu paused. I could practically hear his gleeful smile come through in his voice, even over the phone. “Well, it’d be boring to give that away that easily, wouldn’t it? Use your imagination. Maybe I wanted to make her into a damsel in distress to prompt Andou Jurai’s awakening, or maybe I thought her power was a threat and wanted to take care of it first. Maybe I was hoping to help Andou and Kushikawa reboot their relationship. Who knows! Make like a weekly *Jump* reader and speculate away. I’m really entertaining like that, if you give me a chance.”

Way to dodge the question in the most chuuni way possible. Kiryuu made a habit of making anything and everything he said sound like it was loaded with hidden meaning. He would keep the most pointlessly petty things secret one minute, then casually drop the sort of earthshaking bombshell you’d *think* he’d never want getting out the next. I could never be sure when he was kidding around and when he was being serious.

“You sure made that sound cool, but I bet you’re just putting on airs to cover up the fact that you screwed up, aren’t you?” I jabbed.

According to Kiryuu’s information—which he in turn got from Aki’s power, *Head Hunting*—Sayumi had come up with a remarkable new way of using her power that allowed her to rescue Hatoko from their clutches in the blink of an eye. The literary club crew had never even realized the extent of the crisis that they were dealing with. *Zero* awareness that they were in bigger trouble than they’d ever been in before. And yet somehow, they had brought the incident to a close without a hitch.

“I *know*, right…?” moaned Kiryuu. “And everything was going perfectly according to plan, right up to the point where I put her to sleep with my Evil Eye!”

“You mean that old hag *Eternal Wink*’s Evil Eye, don’t you? Nothing special at all about *your* eyes.”

“Wow, okay… I’ve gotta say, you’re *way* too hard on women who’re older than twenty,” said Kiryuu, sounding more than a little revolted. I stand firm on this, though: any girl who’s past the age of twenty’s an old hag, nonhuman waifus excluded.

“Well, if you don’t feel like giving me a clear answer, I won’t try to drag one out of you. I just thought I might as well ask. Anyway, if that’s all you needed, I’ll be hanging up now.”

“Wait. We still haven’t gotten to the real topic yet.”

“What real topic?” I reflexively asked.

“Bwa ha ha,” Kiryuu cackled again in his own signature way. “Shizumu…isn’t it about time you joined us?”

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“I mean that it’s time for you to take your place in the story. It just so happens I’ve been hoping to pad the team out with another member lately, so join us. Be a Player in this War of ours. I’m sure Leatia wouldn’t say no to bringing just one more person into the picture.”

It was an open solicitation. A flagrant attempt to recruit me for the “War” that he was a participant in. A straight-up letter of invitation to join a real-life supernatural battle. I, of course, knew my reply in an instant. I didn’t even have to think about it.

“No thanks.”

“Hmm. And why not?” Kiryuu cheerfully asked. He didn’t seem especially surprised by my immediate refusal. Odds were good he’d seen it coming in advance.

“That’s a good question… I love manga and anime just as much as you and Andou do, you know? Rom-coms are my personal genre of choice, but I’ve been known to appreciate a good supernatural battle story every once in a while as well. All that said, though, there’s one thing that makes me very different from you two: I’ve *never* wanted to play a part in the stories I enjoy. To me, fiction will never be anything more than fiction. I enjoy it *because* I’m an outsider to the story.”

I’ve never been one to self-insert. I never imagine what it would be like if I somehow ended up in the world of one of my favorite stories. Being a reader lets me appreciate those stories from the perspective of an omniscient observer—*that’s* why they’re fun for me.

“You think I *want* to have boiling-hot tea dumped on me by a klutzy girl, or get beaten to hell and back by an embarrassed tsundere, or get force-fed disgusting sludge that some girl thinks is food? *Hard* pass. And I sure as hell don’t want to be a regular customer at the local hospital like a supernatural battle story’s protagonist, nor do I want to wander into gruesome crime scenes every day like the detective in a mystery. Don’t wanna get injured like the lead in a sports story either.”

I like appreciating stories, but I do *not* like meddling with them. I don't want to be a lead character, a supporting role, or a villain. I just want to be a reader.

"Oh, but if you can convince Leatia to beg me to join while she flashes me a double-peace sign, sticks her tongue out, and rolls her eyes back, I might consider it for a minute or two."

"Bwa ha ha!" Kiryuu cackled. "Now that's an out-there worldview—I *love* it! You're a real character, Sagami Shizumu!"

Most likely, when he said "worldview" he meant it in the most literal sense possible: the point of view from which I perceived the world. It feels like people mostly use it in the more philosophical sense these days, but I could tell that wasn't where he was coming from.

"You're an onlooker in the truest sense of the word. You spectate the world from afar, like an indolent god looking down upon his creation. You really *are* worthy of the title I gave you: he who relishes the sinful flavor of misfortune, *Innocent Onlooker*!"

"Please, *please* stop calling me that. It reeks of chuuni, and I can't stand it."

"Hmm? Is that so? Well, if you hate it that much, perhaps I'll use my second-best idea instead: he who wallows in sinful self-pleasure, *Master Baiter*!"

"You know what? Sorry, I've changed my mind. I'll stick with *Innocent Onlooker*." Not even *I'd* be happy with a title like that. *Especially* considering it's not even that wrong. "While we're on the subject, surely you have to admit that giving somebody's power a name before they even *get* a power is putting the cart before the horse?"

"Bwa ha ha! What's wrong with that? People give their kids names before they're even born, don't they? The nature reflects the name, not the other way around."

"That's really not the same—"

"Oh, but it is. At the very least, I can say with absolute certainty that the way I do names is perfect as far as this War and its powers are concerned," said Kiryuu. "The powers that we Players manifest are intrinsically linked to their wielder's innermost psyche. They're expressions of the deepest, most basic desires that lurk within our hearts… Or at least, it's pretty damn common for those desires to come through in people's powers. Didn't I already tell you all this?"

"Yeah. Well, the gist of it, anyway."

"Take today's main heroine, Kushikawa Hatoko. Her greatest desire would be 'to understand Andou Jurai,' most likely, and that's how she ended up with such an extravagantly awesome power. Of course, her power ended up expressing how she *doesn't* understand chuuni just as much as it expresses her desire to understand it. All-powerful skills like that aren't *quite* what a real chuuni looks for. A power's gotta have a slight defect, or

even better, be just a little bit hard to use properly. *That's* what makes a really cool power."

I understood where he was coming from. Hatoko's power was the sort of ultimate ability an elementary schooler would dream up. It was an ability born from the inherent contradiction of wanting to understand chuunibyou, but being chronically unable to grasp it.

"So if you were, hypothetically, to awaken to your own power, it would end up being something that expresses the deepest facets of your inner self. There's not a doubt in my mind that *Innocent Onlooker* will be the perfect name for it."

"Hmm. Well, in that case..."

A thought struck me, and I couldn't help but share it out loud.

"...I suppose that your power, *Lucifer's Strike*, is a reflection of your desire to turn the world on its head?"

"Good question. Who's to say?" replied Kiryuu, dodging the question like he always did. For someone who loved talking your ear off about crap you weren't at all interested in, he had the most infuriating way of clamming up the moment you had a question that actually mattered.

"In any case," I said, giving up and changing the topic, "I'll be sticking with my usual modus operandi and helping you out whenever the mood strikes me. Oh, and keep in mind that I won't hesitate to betray you if I feel like it."

"That works just fine for me. It's much more interesting that way," replied Kiryuu, his absolute glee clear to hear.

I could tell he was being completely genuine when he said he liked it better that way. Even if I were to betray him tomorrow, he'd just let out a villainous laugh and enjoy the plot twist to the fullest. He understood his own madness and chose to wallow in it without a second thought—a sure sign of a late-stage case of terminal chuunibyou.

"I have just one piece of advice for an indifferent observer like you, Shizumu," said Kiryuu in a tone entirely unlike the way he'd been talking to me up to that point. It was a strange, unique tone that I couldn't quite pin down. Cold, detached, and yet somehow inviting. "You'd do well to overestimate me. Then, and only then, will you finally *under*estimate me."

And with that completely incomprehensible parting quip, he hung up.

I stared at my phone for a moment, speechless, then slipped it into my pocket and looked out over the scenery below. The gentle morning breeze stroked my cheeks, and just as I was starting to enjoy the pleasant elegance of the scene...

"Sagamiii, you jackass pervert son of a bitch!"

...Andou came flying out from the emergency exit, screaming like a banshee.

"What's up, Andou?" I casually asked.

"I'll tell you what's up—you screwed with Hatoko's phone, didn't you?! Why the *hell* is her background set to a drawing of a little girl spreading her

legs and slobbering all over the place?! Are you *trying* to get somebody arrested, here?!"

"What? No way—you're saying you took a peek at her phone?"

"Yeah, on a whim, and it almost gave me a goddamn heart attack! There was a girl standing behind me who went pale as a sheet and friggin' ran away!"

"You've got to be kidding me…why'd you have to go and look, Andou? I was having so much fun imagining how Hatoko would react when she saw it…" What an absolute waste! I was hoping she'd open it in front of her friends in class, or even better, that her parents would happen to see it at home…

"Why do you look like you're on the verge of tears, you freak?! *I'm* the one who should be crying, here!"

"Do me a favor and drop dead, Andou."

"You first, Sagami!"

We let out a long, synchronized sigh, then slumped over in a deep depression, also in unison.

"By the way, Andou, on a totally different subject—"

"Nope, you do *not* get to casually change the topic this time! We're not even close to done yet! First off, apologize! Then hook your fingers into your nose, pull it way back, take a picture and post it all over the internet! *Then* I'll forgive you."

"You said you met Tomoyo's brother a while back, right? What sort of person was he?"

"I *just* said…oh, whatever!" Andou threw his hands up in the air, then he let out a sigh of resignation. "Tomoyo's brother's name is Kiryuu Hajime, and he's…wait a second. Huh? When did I tell you about how I met Kiryuu?"

"Y'know, a while back."

"Weird… I've been going pretty far out of my way to *not* mention that to anyone."

"Technically speaking, I listened in on you and Tomoyo talking about it."

"You were eavesdropping? Come *on*," groaned Andou with a disapproving click of his tongue. Then he grinned. I knew in an instant that he'd gone into chuuni-mode. "Mwa ha ha! Yes, that man… He was a truly exceptional person, so much so that no number of words could ever illustrate his greatness! Nevertheless, if I were to sum him up in a phrase…I would say that he's a man cast from the same mold as I."

"You know you have to be a pretty cool dude yourself to pull that line off, right?"

Though at the same time, I understood what he was saying. Andou Jurai and Kiryuu Hajime were so similar, it was frankly absurd. It was like they were each other's reflection in a mirror: perfectly alike, yet precisely opposite to one another.

"I'm just shocked that you actually met someone who's on your level. Sounds like a guy you should do your best to make friends with."

“I’d love to, really, but I haven’t seen or heard from him at all since that first time. No clue whatsoever what he’s up to right now. We didn’t even trade phone numbers.”

“Is that so? You could just ask Tomoyo for his number, though, couldn’t you?” I’d heard from Kiryuu himself that he and his sister contacted each other every once in a while.

“Hmm, I mean, I *guess* I could… But, like, that’s not exactly the sort of relationship I want to have with him,” said Andou with a sort of awkward smile. “It doesn’t feel like it should be that easy for me to chat with him, I guess.”

“Why not?”

“I guess I just want to meet him by coincidence? Like, one day, we’ll just happen to cross paths again by pure chance. Wouldn’t it feel more, y’know, *destined* that way?”

Just when I was wondering what could be getting his eyes sparkling with excitement like that, it turned out to be the same chuuni nonsense as ever. I was almost disappointed…but then, Andou added one final thought.

“Plus, honestly…I’m a little scared to meet Kiryuu again. I don’t know why, but it feels like the next time I meet him, there’s no telling *what* will end up happening.”

Then we both fell silent. His eyes were still sparkling with childlike wonder, but there was a slight shade of darkness to his gaze as well. The look in his eyes carried a touch of ominous anxiety that sent a chill down my spine. It felt like I was looking straight down into a bottomless pit.

Now, isn’t that something? I suppose Kiryuu didn’t choose *him for nothing.* He might not have been conscious of it, but Andou had noticed the position he was in. He’d instinctively realized that he was standing on the brink of a decision he’d never be able to take back. Maybe that natural sense was his chuuni power at work.

“Hmm? What’re you smirking about, Sagami?” asked Andou. “You sure don’t smile like *that* very often.”

“Oh, nothing! And I do believe it’s time for us to be on our way,” I said, walking past him and stepping back through the emergency exit. I just couldn’t wipe that smile off my face.

I couldn’t have cared less about what happened to the world. Even if it fell to ruin tomorrow, or if Kiryuu turned it on its head like he wanted to, or if Andou brought about the apocalypse itself, I’d consider it nothing more than another plot twist in an ongoing story. Speaking as a reader, all *I* wanted was for that story to be an interesting one.

Be it a story full of supernatural battles or a perfectly commonplace slice of life, I was happy as long as I could enjoy it. And I’d do just about anything for that sake. I’d play just about any sort of role.

Kiryuu Hajime. Andou Jurai. You two are the best characters I could possibly ask for. So go on. Smile, rage, run, dance, scream, tremble with

fear, weep with pathos, bellow out in madness as you bring your story to a close…and show us, your readers, how entertaining you can really be.

Afterword

How would you explain what the blue sky looks like to a person who was born unable to see? How many rulers would you need to measure the width of the universe? And how on Earth can you explain the concept of chuunibyou to someone who's utterly uninterested in the likes of anime and shonen manga? That, in short, is the theme of this volume.

Perhaps one's innate chuuni power is determined at birth, and no matter how hard you try, no matter how hard you train yourself, it can never be increased. Perhaps the chuuni have-nots will remain forever unable to comprehend the concept.

Or, perhaps, it's a talent that can be acquired? Perhaps through a combination of one's environment, one's friendships, and one's exposure to certain select masterpieces, an understanding of chuuni is something that anyone can obtain, if they're willing to put in the legwork? Maybe that's the point of this story...or maybe it's something totally different.

To sum it all up, understanding someone else's sense of values and getting someone else to understand *your* sense of values may both be daunting tasks, but doing your best to understand the people around you is important nonetheless. Maybe that's the sort of run-of-the-mill story I've told here.

Whatever the case, hello! This is Kota Nozomi, and this volume marks a milestone for me: it's my tenth novel since my debut as an author! Nobody else was going to go out of their way to commemorate the occasion for me, so I went ahead and bought a cake to eat on my own.

The reason nobody else celebrated my achievement, of course, was because nobody cares about the likes of me...not! Clearly, it's because everyone wanted to send me the message that I shouldn't get a big head just because I've put a measly ten books out into the world. Well, message received, and the consideration is greatly appreciated! I feel so loved, seriously. You people are all a bunch of tsunderes, y'know that?

And now I'm depressed... Let's move on to the announcements and thanks, shall we?

First, the announcements! I guess there's an audio drama coming out for this series, apparently. Hurray for my first step into the world of mixed media! I can't possibly express my gratitude toward everyone involved in the project. The release is still a long ways off, but I'll be awaiting it with bated breath!

Next up, a side story starring Kiryuu Hajime and titled *The Commonplace Exists for the Sake of Supernatural Battles* is currently being serialized in GA Bunko Magazine! Alternate titles include *Super Big Brother Time* and *Draw! Big Brother Card!* The story depicts what Kiryuu was doing behind Andou's back over the course of the first and second volumes, and even what he was doing before the series started! If you're interested in

Kiryuu and his band of merry friends who made a quick cameo in this volume, please check it out! Stories like that get collected into a published volume *sometimes*, sure, but you never know when you might be missing out...

And with that, onto the thanks! First up: my editor, Nakamizo. As always, thank you for all your help! I'm also extremely grateful that you were willing to run with my idea of putting a stupid chuuni wordplay gag into the ad copy for the second printing of volume one. I feel like maybe, just maybe, both of us had stayed up way too late for our own good when we had that conversation, but eh, I'm probably just imagining it.

Next, to my illustrator, 029! Thank you once again for your stunning art this volume, and sorry for dumping so many characters on you with so little notice.

And next, to Yuuji Yuuji! Thank you so much for giving this series such a wonderful endorsement, and congratulations on *Oreshura*'s upcoming anime adaptation!

Last, but certainly not least, I'd like to offer my most sincere thanks to all the readers who took the time to pick up this novel!

That's all for now! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

Oh, and also, we have another prologue for the next volume this time! Feel free to read it if you're interested.

A Preview for Next Time: The Eccentricity of Himeki Chifuyu

Bright and early one morning, I was walking along the path to school, just like I always did. Hatoko had run ahead of me so that a friend of hers could take a look at her homework, so I was walking on my own for once.

“Hmm…?”

Less than a minute before I would’ve arrived at the school gates, I happened to spot a familiar face: Chifuyu. She was standing right by the gate, her backpack slung over her shoulders and Squirrely held tightly in her arms. A lone elementary schooler stuck out like a sore thumb among the crowd of high schoolers filing through the gateway.

“Good morning, Chifuyu!” I called out as I walked over to her.

“Morning, Andou,” she replied in her usual monotone.

Well, this feels kinda refreshing, I thought. She came over to hang out at our school pretty much every day, but that was always *after* school. I’d never encountered her this early in the morning before.

“What’re you doing here, Chifuyu?” I asked. “Are you waiting for Miss Satomi?”

She shook her head.

“Oh, okay… But what about *your* school? You’re gonna be late if you don’t get a move on, you know?”

Yokoi Elementary, the school Chifuyu attended, was a decent distance away from my school. That said, Chifuyu could always use her power, *World Create*, to teleport there in the blink of an eye. I figured that she’d taken that fact into consideration and was loitering around here knowing perfectly well that she could still beat the bell…but, as it turned out, that assumption was drastically mistaken.

“I won’t be late. I don’t have to go,” she replied indifferently.

“After all, I quit school.”

Oh? Hmm. Yeah, okay. That would do it. No need to worry about being late, in that case. Wow, who’d have thought? Chifuyu dropped out of school! Wild!

“…You *what*?!”

KOTA NOZOMI PRESENTS★★★
ILLUSTRATOR: 029

©029

Time is Sin
With each passing second...
...a new transgression!
Come forth, the Skill of time and flame!
© 029

SAYUMI
"I sincerely hope these days of peace and quiet can carry on forever."
"Yes... forever."
CHIFUYU
"Maaan, I wonder if I'll get to crank up my internal Inferno Gate to Maximum Hell-Firepower anytime soon?"
"Why does everyone always have to get up in the morning?"
ANDOU
HATOKO
"Chuuni sure is complicated, huh?"
"I'm not crazy. This whole damn world is."
KRYUU
TOMOYO
"I'm done with that crap, you hear me?!"
"I'm not like you and Hajime!"
© 029

Bonus Translation Notes: On “English”

One of the weirdest and most paradoxically challenging tasks when translating fiction is when you’re called upon to translate something from one language…into the *same* language.

This comes up more often than you might think, and in a wider variety of ways than you might expect! Take, for instance, how loanwords can complicate the translation process: in a book I translated recently, I ended up rendering a phrase that would literally translate as “A-5 rank marbled meat from a domestically raised cow” as “A-5 wagyu.” In other words, I translated one Japanese phrase into a totally different Japanese word, because that Japanese word happened to be the most concise and natural means of expressing the concept to an English-speaking audience.

As weird as those instances are, though, they’re not what I’ll be focusing on in this section. Source language to source language translation is a really fascinating subject, but when Andou’s in the picture, target language to target language translation is the *much* more prominent problem. And by target language to target language, I mean, of course, translating “English” to English.

Now, before I really dig into this issue, I want to make one thing perfectly clear: this is *not* a case of “the author was bad at English and made a bunch of questionable decisions that had to be corrected.” In fact, it’s exactly the opposite: a lot of the English in *Supernatural Battles* is pointedly, *deliberately* bad in ways that are actually quite clever! Take, for instance, Andou’s misunderstanding about how the word “great” works, and how that contributes to Kudou’s misunderstanding (and, by extension, the conflict that drives the first half of this volume). That’s not the sort of joke you can write unless you have both a pretty solid grasp of English grammar *and* a solid understanding of common mistakes second-language learners make—or, at the very least, it shows the ability to do your research in those areas, and do it well.

The thing is, though, that multilingual jokes that lean on a character being bad at a foreign language can be *really* awkward when you’re translating the work into the exact same language that the character is supposed to be bad at! Mishandling that sort of content means your translation will read as awkward in the best case, and make no sense at all in the worst. If you just translate the Japanese and leave the English entirely as-is, you’ll almost certainly end up in one of those two areas, even if you do an excellent job on the “translating the Japanese” part.

Further complicating the issue in this particular case is the fact that Andou isn’t actually *bad*-bad at English. In fact, considering his age and demographic, he’s actually pretty good at it! He wouldn’t have been able to come up with the *Route of Origin* double meaning if he wasn’t, after all

(which, I should note, was not a localization flourish—that English double meaning was explicitly present and noted in the original Japanese text).

It felt important, as such, to make him come across as being *decent* at English, but prone to the sort of careless mistakes and awkwardness that a high schooler like him would tend to fall into. This is a big part of why we decided to refrain from altering some of the slightly awkward power names and titles. *World Creation* might sound more natural than *World Create*, for instance, but *World Create*'s English isn't awkward because Kota Nozomi made a mistake—it's slightly awkward because *Andou* made a mistake, and as such, it's a sort of awkwardness that feels worth preserving in its English incarnation.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. Before I go into the particulars of how we've been addressing the "English" in *Supernatural Battles*, I'd like to talk about some of the other techniques that we could've gone with but ultimately decided against!

Probably the most immediately obvious technique to deal with a character speaking your target language in the original text, and one of the most common, is to have the character say the same phrase in a totally different language. A character who decides to get all fancy by speaking English could speak in French instead, for example. I've used this technique myself in the past, and in many circumstances, it works great!

The thing is, that technique only really works when the important factor is *just* "this character is speaking in a foreign language." The moment the *specific* language they're speaking becomes important, it all starts falling apart, and that becomes more and more likely the more they speak in it over the course of the story.

This problem is also *vastly* more dangerous when you're working with serialized media rather than a full, self-contained work. One volume you're making a character who likes saying "please" for no apparent reason say "s'il vous plait" instead, the next volume you have to make it so that character lived in France for a year in their backstory instead of America to justify the change, and the volume after *that* when the characters end up going to America for whatever reason, you're stuck desperately retconning everything you've translated up to that point.

This is the stuff that translators' nightmares are made of, and I think that all of us have come uncomfortably close to making this sort of mistake at some point in our careers. Or maybe I'm just projecting. Moving on!

A couple other possibilities for handling this issue are sort of polar opposites to each other: glossing over the use of English, and making the use of English *very* clearly and specifically marked whenever it comes up.

The former would involve finding a functional equivalent for the character speaking English that's language-agnostic, based around the context of the English's original use. If the character uses random, gratuitous English because they're a globetrotting businessperson who likes to show off, for instance, having them use a ton of corporate buzzwords and

business-speak could potentially serve as a functional equivalent. The goal is to identify the *effect* that English being used has on the character's portrayal and come up with a quirk that has the same effect without requiring them to actually speak in a different language.

In *Supernatural Battles*'s case, of course, this was never an option. Scenes like Andou discussing his test with Miss Satomi wouldn't work at all if we took the English factor out entirely, and more importantly, doing so would be a major betrayal of one of the series' core sources of humor. This technique can work great in some circumstances, but in this instance, it wasn't on the table to begin with.

The other technique I mentioned above, however—clearly and specifically marking the use of English—is actually very close to what we ultimately settled on! The purest example of this would be coming up with some manner of clearly marking when characters are speaking another language. Enclosing English dialogue in brackets [like this] is a technique I've seen used on a number of occasions, and it works really well when the fact that a foreign language is being spoken is plot-relevant!

The one issue with that version of the technique is that it's, well, a little jarring, in my mind. Not so much when it's used in rare, isolated cases, but when you get to the point where you have bracketed dialogue every three or four pages, it just feels like a bit much to me.

That, finally, leads me to our solution to the "English" problem in *Supernatural Battles*: we decided that we would go to great pains to make sure that whenever a character speaks or otherwise uses English, the fact that they're saying/writing it in English is acknowledged in *some* capacity without resorting to a specific, recurring mark like the bracket method.

The big benefit to this method is that as the series goes on and conventions are established, we'll be able to be more and more subtle with our use of it, and as such get closer and closer to the experience of reading the series in the original Japanese. Take Andou and Kiryuu's power names, for instance. One of our early priorities in volume one was to establish quickly and consistently that the names of all the main characters' powers are being said in English. By doing so early on and getting the reader used to the idea, we were able to save ourselves a lot of hassle and omit a lot of what would otherwise have been necessary additional exposition during the entire Kudou-misunderstanding-her-power's-name sequence.

By the time we got to the part where Kiryuu introduces his team's power names, the convention was so thoroughly established that we didn't feel the need to add in the specification that they were in English anymore. Our readers know how Andou and Kiryuu behave well enough at that point to make that conclusion themselves. Or at least, that's the theory—hopefully it worked out for you! Other, less recurring uses of English will still need supporting text, of course, but once the idea that the characters are canonically mostly speaking in Japanese but sometimes dip into English is

clearly established, it becomes much easier to note when the English moments occur without having it feel awkward and jarring.

Anyway, I hope that this long, meandering ramble has given you some insight into how translators approach one of the stranger issues that can crop up when working with this sort of media. There are a *lot* of other ways in which *Supernatural Battles* plays with English that are worth discussing, but I'm running out of space, and they'll have to wait for a future TL notes section!

And speaking of TL notes, it's time for the real meat of this section: the preposterous pile of references peppered throughout the volume! As always, I've organized them chronologically and omitted any references that are explained well enough within the text itself. Here we go!

Chapter 1:

I was buying an eroge this time.

"Eroge" is a piece of Japanese slang that's been fairly widely adopted by the English fanbase for the works it refers to! They are, simply put, pornographic video games. Most often (but not exclusively) the term refers to visual novels, which is another term that's somewhat disputed. Broadly speaking, visual novels are games with an unusually high amount of story and an unusually small amount of gameplay. In any case, we made the call to keep the term as-is, largely because even if Sagami were a native English speaker, he would absolutely still be the sort of person to lean into niche jargon and call them eroge.

As a side note, an interesting tidbit about this line is that in the anime adaptation of this scene, Sagami claims to have bought a "galge" instead (galge being a term for the same general sort of game, only without the explicitly pornographic connotations). This is just one of many tweaks the adaptation made to the little particulars of the story, which I'll probably be writing about in more detail in a later TL note section!

…he'd raise his hands in the air, shout "People of Earth! Let me give you my hottie energy!" and pull a reverse Spirit Bomb…

This is a reference to the final, climactic fight in the original run of *Dragon Ball*. The Spirit Bomb is a technique that lets the user gather up the energy of other people to use in a single, massive attack, and the final blow of that final fight is struck with an enormous Spirit Bomb powered by all the people of the Earth at once.

I'm nothing like that moé-swilling, waifu-wrangling creeper!

"Moé" is a slang term that originated in Japan and made its way into popular use among the English-speaking anime fandom at some point in the late 2000s/early 2010s. The term is notoriously hard to pin down in much the same way as chuuni, but digging into the particulars would be way too ambitious a topic for a single TL note, so I'll narrow things down to just the most relevant info: in the context Andou is using it here, moé refers to both a character archetype and a genre of media.

The character archetype is probably best described as a sort of complicated form of cuteness. It's really broad, and characters that aren't cute in any sort of traditional sense can still be described as moé under the right circumstances, but the sort of moé characters that Sagami is into are almost certainly the sort of characters that populate the casts of eroge (see the first note for this chapter) and slice-of-life anime focusing on exclusively female casts.

That brings us to the genre side of the equation, moé anime! Moé shows are usually slice-of-life adjacent, usually star a cast of exclusively female and predominantly young characters, and tend to focus more on the

characters being cute than on any sort of plot progression. The moé genre experienced a massive surge of popularity around the time the term made its way overseas, thanks in no small part to a sequence of mega-popular, moé-heavy anime by Kyoto Animation (*K-On* being a genre-defining example). Having come out in 2012, this particular volume was released pretty much right at the height of the moé boom, and Sagami being into the genre is entirely unsurprising.

□ You'd best watch yourself, Andou, or I'll Pretty your Cure!

Pretty Cure is a long-running and extremely popular series of magical girl anime. The franchise has a lot of similarities to the *Kamen Rider* and *Super Sentai* franchises we discussed last volume, actually—each season is a year long and features an entirely new story with a totally new cast of characters that transform into super-forms to fight monsters.

Though ostensibly targeted toward young girls, *Pretty Cure* (or *Precure*, as it's known to its fans) has a massive fanbase of older viewers, many of whom are male. Sagami being into the show definitely tells us something about him, but it's more of a "he's this specific sort of nerd" revelation than anything else. "Male *Precure* fan" isn't necessarily a negative archetype in and of itself, although as we'll see later on in this volume, there *are* caveats to that claim.

□ ...Kiva had this ridiculously cool super-kick called the Darkness Moon Break...

This attack's name is hilariously edgy for a reason: *Kamen Rider Kiva*'s theme was horror, and vampires in particular. "Kiva" itself is a somewhat strained pun—it's both a play on the Japanese word for "fang" and also an abbreviation of, and I'm quoting this directly, "King of Vampire."

□ So, I've been thinking it's about time I take up this wooden sword with 'Lake Toya' written on it and learn a special move of my own.

This line plays into and expands upon Andou's *Gintama* reference in his previous line! To make a very long story short, *Gintama* is an extremely long-running action/gag manga with an unusually anarchic sense of humor. The main character, Gintoki, uses a wooden sword with the words "Lake Toya" written on it as his weapon of choice, and a running gag in the series involves a spirit that possesses said sword attempting to force Gintoki to learn a fighting game-style special move.

□ If you parody people, they'll parody you back.

This is very close to a line from *Shaman King*—"If you hurt people, they'll hurt you back," in the original.

Just like a certain Bankai that had an effective range of up to thirteen kilometers…

This is in reference to Gen Ichimaru's Bankai, specifically (Bankai being the magic sword superpowers from *Bleach*).

I'd put on an act so terrifying nobody would dare to approach me, no matter how badly they wanted to kick my ass!

Yup, it's another *JoJo* reference! This one's a little different, though, in that it's actually an adapted *JoJo* reference. In the original text, Andou actually quotes Polnareff—a character from *JoJo Part 3*—as he describes DIO's power to stop time. The quote in question has become a meme among the Japanese *JoJo* fandom, but the English-speaking fandom didn't make much of anything of the scene at all.

As such, a direct translation would've lost the "Andou is being a memelord" aspect of the exchange, and we decided that subbing in a *JoJo* meme that's still appropriate to the situation which our readers would be more likely to understand was the way to go. Under those conditions, DIO's "Oh? You're approaching me?" seemed to be the perfect fit!

Now I know how it feels to be the one member of your crew who actually bothers working out…

Andou is most likely referring to Roronoa Zoro, a swordsman from *One Piece* who takes working out to comical extremes (and is, as Andou notes, the only member of his pirate crew who really ever works out at all).

Oh, that was a From the Northern Country reference, wasn't it?

From the Northern Country (or *Kita no Kuni Kara*) was a Japanese TV drama that aired primarily in the early 1980s. The show revolves around a man who moves from Tokyo to his home prefecture of Hokkaido with his two children following a nasty divorce. The show is reportedly quite the tearjerker, and the scene Andou inadvertently half quotes involves the main character snapping at a waitress in a ramen restaurant ("The kid hasn't finished eating yet!") and knocking a bowl out of her hands.

Although this is an incredibly obscure piece of media by the standards of anyone outside of Japan, hilariously, it might very well be one of the most accessible references in the book for the average Japanese person. This is very much mainstream pop culture rather than otaku niche pop culture, which would explain why Sayumi of all people was the one to call out Andou's non-quote.

Chapter 2:

□ You think you can hide from the power of Pesquisa?

Pesquisa is a supernatural power that features in *Bleach*. The specifics vary from character to character, but long story short, it gives the user the ability to supernaturally sense the area around them.

□ She's not Haizaki Shogo!

Haizaki Shogo is a character from *Kuroko's Basketball*, a sports manga by Fujimaki Tadatoshi that ran in *Shonen Jump*. The manga is notable for being one of those sports stories that goes pretty over the top with its anime silliness, and many of its characters have battle manga-style special skills and powers. Haizaki's power allows him to steal other characters' special moves in much the same way that *Grateful Robber* allows Kudou to steal powers, but the one exception to his ability is that it doesn't work on the members of the main character's former team, who are collectively known as the Generation of Miracles.

Chapter 3:

What are you, a second-generation Pokémon protagonist?

In second-generation *Pokémon* games (that is, *Pokémon Gold*, *Silver*, and *Crystal*), the player character whites out when all their Pokémon fall unconscious. Contrast with the first-gen games, in which you black out instead.

As best as I could tell, she was aiming to sound like some kind of gangster.

The entire sequence revolving around Chifuyu's not-so-successful attempt at putting on a silly accent took some pretty heavy tweaking to make the joke land in English! In Japanese, Chifuyu is not just cycling through accents with genre-fiction connotations, she's also going through hyperspecific regional accents associated with particular regions of Japan, with the punchline being that Andou can only identify them thanks to having heard them in a specific anime (*Sgt. Frog*).

The thing is, that joke only lands if the accents themselves are identifiable *and* if the reader is aware of all the different regional accents that the characters from *Sgt. Frog* speak with. Lacking that context, the scene comes across as "Chifuyu does an ambiguous accent, then Andou turns around and explains to the reader what part of Japan the accent is supposed to represent." In short, all humor is lost. Since the core of the joke is "Chifuyu does accents poorly and Andou relates them to media he knows," tweaking the sources of the accents themselves seemed like an appropriate measure to take!

Hunter takes manga and movie titles, barely changes them, and puts them in as power names all the time.

Like *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, *Hunter x Hunter* is indeed full of this stuff. Examples include superpowers with names that can be read as "Jailhouse Rock" (an Elvis song) and "Shotgun Blues" (A Guns N' Roses song).

Chapter 4

Gear…Two!

This, and the pose that Andou references a line later, are both references to a famous moment in *One Piece* where the main character, Luffy, unveils a powerful new technique.

Our friggin' floor knows how to use its Haki!

Another *One Piece* reference! Haki is a power in that series that, among other things, is the only consistent means of harming people who have eaten Devil Fruits (one of which gave Luffy his rubber powers).

Hatoko's a great card! You don't even have to Tribute any other monsters to summon her.

Machi's specifically treating Hatoko like a *Yu-Gi-Oh* card in this line. In *Yu-Gi-Oh*, higher-level monsters require you to sacrifice one or more monsters to summon them—hence Andou's retort about her treating Hatoko like a weakling.

We'll simply think up stories on the fly to pass the time, like indolent nobles in the Heian era."

The Heian era was a period of Japanese history lasting from the late eighth century to the late twelfth century. It's notable for having been an exceptionally active era for the arts, and it was fairly common for the upper classes to engage in the sort of word games that Sayumi's alluding to. Poetry was especially prominent in those gatherings, and some of the poems that were written at them are still read and studied to this day.

Or a fork…but I guess that one's hero-on-heroine violence, so it's sorta different.

Andou's referencing a light novel series called *Nyaruko: Crawling with Love* in this line. The series, written by Aisora Manta, is an over-the-top parody of the works of H.P. Lovecraft in which all the eldritch abominations from Lovecraft's stories are portrayed as cute anime waifus who constantly harass the main character. A running gag involves said main character punishing them by sticking them with a fork—hence Andou's line.

It's been a prominent technique as far back as City Hunter.

City Hunter is a classic Jump manga by Hojo Tsukasa that dates back to 1985. The series stars Saeba Ryo, a skilled gunman who works as a sort of mercenary in Tokyo, and Makimura Kaori, the sister of Ryo's late partner (who was murdered near the beginning of the series). As far as this reference goes, the series' most noteworthy trait is the running gag of Kaori pulling comically enormous hammers out of nowhere to bludgeon Ryo with whenever he does something perverted. It is, in fact, one of the earliest

instances of hammerspace being used as a running gag in the manga world! I can't say with confidence that it's the origin of the trope in Japanese media, but there's no denying that its use was incredibly influential.

□ ...or stories with characters who aren't even human but have powers with names in Spanish or Italian...

While Andou's first point about people speaking Japanese in other worlds but having English titles is applicable to so many series it's impossible to pin down any single specific title, the inclusion of Spanish in this line feels pretty targeted at *Bleach* in specific. The series was well known for pulling the names of its powers from a variety of languages, with Spanish being a clear favorite of the author's. We've actually already seen an example of this in this very volume—see the reference to a power called Pesquisa back in chapter two.

□ Is it supposed to be the Gurongi language? Or maybe they're just mumbling through their lines like the lead actor in Kamen Rider: Blade? Come on, people, we speak Rinto here!

Okay, this is a pretty elaborate one. Andou is referencing two distinct *Kamen Rider* series—*Kamen Rider Kuuga* and *Kamen Rider Blade—and* two distinct Japanese internet memes that revolve around the *Kamen Rider* franchise.

First off, the references: the Gurongi language is a fictional language spoken by the monsters that serve as *Kuuga*'s villains. The series took the somewhat cheeky move of having its villains discuss late-game plot elements and twists in that fictional language very early on in the series, trusting that nobody would be able to decipher it until all the reveals had already happened.

The next reference, on the other hand, is *also* the first of our two internet memes: the "fictional language" spoken by the main character of *Kamen Rider Blade*. If we'd translated Andou's second sentence in this block literally, it would've come out as simply "Or maybe it's Ondouru?" This, of course, would have been completely incomprehensible to English readers—not only is "Ondouru" not a commonly known aspect of the series, even among English-speaking *Kamen Rider* fans, it's not actually a real aspect of the series at all!

"Ondouru," as it turns out, is an in-joke within the Japanese *Blade* fandom. The actor who portrayed the main character in the series was somewhat notorious for his questionable enunciation, and the fandom eventually started acting as if he was speaking an entirely different language. The name "Ondouru" came from a particularly infamous and incomprehensible line of his in an early episode. None of this information is readily available in English online, so not only is it a *Kamen Rider* deep cut, it's one that's impossible to look up without a functional grasp of Japanese.

As such, we decided to support the joke with an explanation rather than leave it as is.

Finally, “we speak Rinto here” takes the sequence all the way back to *Kuuga* again. In *Kuuga*’s backstory, the Rinto people are an ancient ancestor to humanity who were almost wiped out by the Gurongi. “We speak Rinto here” is a line from the series that Japanese fans ended up using to mean something along the lines of a sarcastic “Say that again, but in English this time.” Unlike Ondouru, the whole Rinto backstory is a known factor to the English *Kamen Rider* fandom, so we decided to leave it unaltered as a nod to how obsessively detailed Andou’s *Kamen Rider* deep cuts can get.

As for my story’s theme…I chose ‘Dazai Osamu’!

Dazai Osamu was an author who lived in the mid-twentieth century. Though not incredibly well-known in the English-speaking world, his works are extremely famous and oft read in Japan. By global standards, *No Longer Human* is probably his most famous story.

Y’know how you sometimes see characters in original fiction who are supposed to be the descendants of other people’s famous characters, like Sherlock Holmes or Arsène Lupin?

Trivia time: the original Arsène Lupin stories actually fell victim to copyright issues on account of featuring Sherlock Holmes himself in a cameo appearance! Unfortunately for Maurice Leblanc, he and Arthur Conan Doyle were contemporaries, and Doyle took the appropriation of his most famous character rather poorly. Leblanc’s solution, hysterically, was to continue featuring a suspiciously familiar private detective in his Arsène stories by the name of “Herlock Sholmes.” In short: the hilarity of copyright technicalities hasn’t changed in well over a century, at the absolute least.

More like watching you from the afterlife and muttering ‘his has been a life of much shame’!

In this line, Tomoyo is quoting a very slightly adapted version of the first line of *No Longer Human*.

The most repulsive form of chuuni is to force innocent people who don’t know better to read your cringey backstories, and to use others merely for your own satisfaction!

Tomoyo’s loosely quoting Bruno Bucciarati, a character from *JoJo Part 5*. The original line occurs after Bucciarati realizes the depths of the part’s primary villain’s depravity (though of course when he says it, he talks about the villain’s evil rather than his chuuni).

Chapter 5

…repeating an internal mantra of I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away!

Andou's pulling a Shinji here—by which I mean, he's quoting the internal mantra of Shinji Ikari, the protagonist of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

Chapter 6

♪ I'm spending the afternoon in the arcade playing the Precure card machines...

As previously noted back in chapter 1, *Precure* has an expansive fanbase that reaches far beyond the elementary school girl demographic the show's theoretically targeted yet. That said, the arcade game that Sagami's talking about here is very much aimed at the elementary school market, to the point that the machines are conspicuously child-sized. I mentioned that while Sagami being a *Precure* fan tells the reader that he's one of *those* nerds, it's not necessarily in a judgmental way, but him spending his time monopolizing the arcade game tells us that he's also one of *those* Precure fans, which is a lot less neutral of a tidbit to learn about him.

Epilogue

「 Makes me wish I had that ointment that Rukawa Kaede used to get rid of his swelling overnight before the big match with Sannoh High.

Kiryuu's referencing *Slam Dunk*, a basketball manga by Inoue Takehiko. Rukawa Kaede is a member of the main characters' team who ends up taking a nasty blow to the eye in a match, leading to major swelling, only to recover overnight after a member of the team responsible for his injury gives him a seemingly sketchy but incredibly effective ointment in an effort to apologize.

Afterword

「 Draw! Big Brother Card!

This title is a reference to a notorious scene from *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in which the main character absolutely brutalizes a bit villain in a children's card game, drawing monster card after monster card until one of his friends has to run in and physically stop him. Interestingly enough, this is an instance of a meme that made the jump pretty directly from the Japanese-speaking side of the internet to the English-speaking side. You can find the scene in question by searching for "Draw! Monster card!" and I highly recommend doing so, since it's absolutely hilarious.

And, that's all the reference humor we have to unpack this time! Once again, I leave you with the author and illustrator's comments from the inside cover of the original release, which you'll find below. I hope you enjoy them, and I hope to see you again in the next volume!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi’s Cringe Chronicles: Part 2

When I was a student, I somehow got it into my head that wearing a T-shirt with a skinny necktie on top was the height of fashion. That is to say, I tied the tie directly around my neck. And to top it all off, both the T-shirt *and* the tie were black.

I cannot possibly thank my mother enough for refusing to let me go out in public in that getup.

Illustrator: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works) and *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan).

V1: \ *Thunk!* /

V2: \ *Boing!* /

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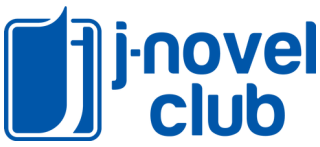

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